

Judgment Day

Teacher Fallibility

Case Overview

Background

Teacher: Mr. Eric Vaughn
Experience: First Year
Class: 9th Grade English



Storyline: Eric Vaughn is in his first year of teaching after spending four years in the marketing department of a major paper products company. Early in the case, it is clear that Eric is quite frustrated with his students' academic performance and behavior. Much of his frustration stems from the fact that many of his 9th grade English students lack a fundamental understanding of material that he feels they should have mastered in their middle school years.

While returning a set of particularly poor tests, Eric becomes upset with how unconcerned the students seem to be with their poor performances. What ensues is a steadily deteriorating series of verbal exchanges between Eric and the class that ends with Eric leaving the room and slamming the door in frustration and anger. In the aftermath of this emotional moment, Eric struggles with the difficult question of how he can return to the classroom the following day.

Star Teacher Function: Teacher Fallibility

Some key beliefs and behaviors that comprise this function are:

- ❑ Star teachers recognize that students cannot learn in a classroom environment where mistakes are not accepted as part of the human condition in general, and as a normal part of the learning process.
- ❑ Star teachers accept their own fallibility and are comfortable apologizing for personal and professional errors that they make in the classroom.
- ❑ Star teachers willingly acknowledge that they can and do make serious mistakes in their relationships with students. In contrast, less successful teachers will often only admit to making minor mistakes in the classroom, such as misspelling a word on the board or giving students a wrong answer.
- ❑ Star teachers recognize that if they publicly embarrass or falsely accuse a class that their apology must likewise be public.

For a more detailed description of this function, see pages 68-71 in *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (Haberman 1995), which accompanies this series.

Other Topics and Issues

Although the main purpose of *Judgment Day* is to stimulate reflection on the star teacher function of *teacher fallibility*, the case provides the opportunity for examining other issues and topics. These issues include accepting students at their current levels of academic development, providing remedial work for students, stress management, maintaining emotional control, avoiding confrontational situations with students, problems associated with teacher use of sarcasm and public embarrassment of students, the highly personal nature of classroom teaching, and potential legal ramifications of leaving the classroom unattended.

Scene Summaries and Questions

Scene 1: A Day in November. Eric's Classroom.

Summary: Eric Vaughn is at his desk grading papers and recording student scores in his grade book when a fellow English teacher interrupts him to ask if she can borrow a copy of his teacher's edition. In the ensuing conversation, it becomes apparent that Eric is very disappointed with the test results and quite frustrated by his students' lack of basic skills, skills he says they should have learned in previous grades.

Possible Questions:

1. What is your reaction to the teacher's comment that perhaps Eric is expecting too much from his students?
2. How do teachers maintain high expectations for students when they are performing below grade level?
3. What are some other possible explanations for the students' poor test performance?
4. (TQ) What are some specific strategies teachers can use when returning tests on which students performed poorly?

Scene 2: Closing Minutes of Class Period. 9th Grade English Class.

Summary: Eric reports the test results on the board and proceeds to return individual papers. As he does so, he shares his disappointment with the results and lectures the students on the importance of the writing process. Most of the students seem to be ignoring his remarks and are exhibiting a less-than-concerned attitude about their poor performance. Eric becomes aware that his words are falling on deaf ears. He stops his speech and stares at a group of students who are especially loud and clearly inattentive.

Possible Question

1. What do you think Eric is thinking and feeling at this moment?
2. What do you predict Eric's response is going to be?
3. (TQ) What would you do or say if you were Eric?

Scene 3. Moments Later.

Summary: Eric responds by suggesting that the students apparently have "no respect

for anything or anyone.” “If you did,” he adds, “ you would make some attempt to be semi-literate.”

Possible Questions:

1. How would you characterize the nature of Eric’s remarks?
2. What is the dominant message that Eric is sending to the class with his verbal and nonverbal communications?
3. (TQ) How do you think students will respond to Eric’s comments?

Scene 4: Moments Later.

Summary: Students respond to Eric’s sarcasm and judgmental comments by reminding him that they told him they “didn’t know how to do this stuff.” Eric’s answer is to respond with more insulting comments about how the material is a review of the 6th and 7th grades. When a female student starts to argue this point, he stops her in mid-sentence to add the sarcastic observation that perhaps their work is understandable because it is consistent with where their behavior is, both being at the 6th grade level. More comments follow as Eric informs the class that they will probably be unable to get even the poorest paying jobs because they won’t be able to fill out a simple job application.

Possible Questions:

1. Do you think Eric can gain control of the deteriorating classroom atmosphere? Why or why not?
2. Have you experienced this type of situation as either a teacher or a student? If so, what does your experience suggest will happen next?
3. (TQ) What should Eric do in response to the students’ request to go over the test?

Scene 5: Moments Later.

Summary: Eric responds to the question about reviewing the test answers by informing the class that they are already weeks behind and that there is not enough time to go over the test. He then posts the answer key at the front of the room, suggesting that those students who care to, can go over the test on their own time.

Possible Questions:

1. Was Eric’s response defensible?
2. How can teachers manage the demands of “covering the curriculum” and preparing students for proficiency tests when students have knowledge and skill deficiencies?
3. (TQ) How would you characterize the students’ behavior at this point in time? What might they be thinking?

Scene 6: Moments Later.

Summary: A male student named Corey responds to Eric’s refusal to go over the test by saying, “Man, you can’t teach. You’re just like the rest of them. All you care about is

your pay check!” Eric’s response is to strike back by finding Corey’s test paper, waving it in the air, and announcing to the entire class that Corey has an “F.” Frustrated, angry, and perhaps embarrassed by his own behavior, Eric storms out of the classroom, slamming the door as he goes. The class claps upon his departure as if they have triumphed in causing him to leave.

Custom Stop Point: You may want to pause the video immediately after Corey lashes out with his “all you care about is your paycheck” comment. Ask participants what they would do in response to such a comment from a student.

Possible Questions:

1. What would you do if you were Eric?
2. What new problems has Eric created for himself by his reaction to Corey’s comment?
3. What are the potential legal implications of leaving a classroom unattended?
4. (TQ) How do think this event will affect Eric in the coming hours?

Scene 7: Later the Same Day. At Home.

Summary: Eric is at home with his wife watching the evening news when she turns off the TV and asks him, “What is wrong?” Eric summarizes the day’s events and goes on to describe the stress and frustration he is experiencing at school. He eventually reveals that he is thinking about quitting teaching. The wife’s response is to remind him of how much he hated his old job and that he has to stick this out. She then suggests he call a fellow teacher named Gary and go play some basketball in an effort to clear his head.

Possible Questions:

1. What does this scene have to say about the highly personal nature of classroom teaching?
2. What would you say to Eric in response to his comment that “Kids shouldn’t come to me this way” (i.e., they should not make it into the 9th grade without the prerequisite knowledge and skills)?
3. What are the major issues or questions Eric needs to resolve? Which ones are immediate, and which ones can wait?
4. (TQ) What would you do if you found yourself in Eric’s position?

Scene 8: Later the Same Evening. The School Gym.

Summary: Eric joins his friend and colleague, Gary, at the school gym, where it becomes evident to Gary that Eric is distracted and not himself Gary asks Eric what is wrong, and Eric responds by explaining that “his head is a mess” over the fact that he lost it in class and “got out on a kid.” He goes on to explain that he doesn’t know what to do and is confused about whether he should apologize to the class.

Custom Stop Point: You may want to pause the video immediately after Eric says he is thinking about apologizing and asks “What do I do when I go in there tomorrow?”

Invite participants to advise Eric on what he should do.

Possible Questions:

1. What do you think of Gary’s advice? What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of not apologizing?
2. Is apologizing a sign of weakness? Will Eric be “vulnerable to the kids” if he apologizes?
3. (TQ) If you would advise Eric to apologize, make specific recommendations on how he should go about it. How, when, where, and to whom should he apologize?

Scene 9: The Next Day. 9th Grade English Class.

Summary: A student enters the classroom and announces to her classmates that Mr. Vaughn is coming. Students are subdued because they are unsure of what to expect from Eric. This is their first contact since yesterday’s unfortunate events. Eric goes to the blackboard in a businesslike manner and announces that they are beginning a new unit. He then instructs the class to open their books. As he does so, he hears a female student in the front row say, “Here we go again.” Eric turns and stares as the scene ends.

Possible Questions:

1. Do you think that Eric has decided not to apologize? If so, what do you think of that decision?
2. (TQ) Will Eric respond to the student’s comment? If so, what will be the nature of the response?

Scene 10: Moments Later.

Summary: Eric responds by setting his book aside, pulling a desk close to the students and apologizing to the entire class and to Corey. He explains that he would like to change the classroom atmosphere and hopes, with the students’ help, that they can get off to a fresh start. As the scene ends, he invites the class to offer suggestions on specific things they could do to improve classroom conditions.

Possible Questions:

1. What is your reaction to Eric’s apology? Were there specific aspects of his remarks that you thought were particularly strong or weak?
2. Do you think Eric will be able to rebuild his relationship with the class? Why or why not?

Judgment Day Video Case Transcript



Scene 1: A Day in November. Eric's Classroom.

Cathy: *(a fellow English teacher)* Eric, do you have a minute?

Eric: Sure, Cathy, come on in.

Cathy: Do you have the teacher's edition for English Lit.? I need one. I don't know what I did with mine.

Eric: Can I get this back today?

Cathy: Okay. How are you doing?

Eric: Bad, I just finished grading tests for Unit 3, and they're atrocious. Look at this. Look at all the D's and F's. That comes up to: 70% of these kids failed a review of the 7th and 8th grade. I mean, I want to help these kids, but it's like they don't care. I'm just at a loss. I expected better than this.

Cathy: Maybe you're just expecting too much from the kids.

Eric: I don't know. It's a review, though. I just feel like they should be able to do this. This is the 9th grade. They should have already had this. Oh, look at the time. I'm sorry. I have to get these done. They'll be here in five minutes.

Cathy: Okay.

Eric: I want to give them back.

Cathy: Okay, well, good luck.

Eric: Okay.

Cathy: Okay, take care.

Eric: Thanks.

Cathy: Thanks a lot! Goodbye.



Scene 2: 45 Minutes Later. Eric's 9th Grade English Class.

Eric:

Okay, in case you've been wondering throughout the class what *these numbers* are on the board. They are the results of the latest test. 0 A's, 2 B's, 6 C's, 13 D's, and 10 F's. I have your papers *here*. I was hoping that you guys would take the writing process a little more seriously. Sherry. Dexter. Jennifer (*handing back papers*). I guess you don't realize the writing process is an important part of your education (*pausing and staring at a group of students who are not paying attention*).



Scene 3: Moments Later.

Eric: Don't you guys care about anything or anybody? Don't *these* (referring to *the test scores*) mean anything to you? You know, I'm beginning to wonder if you guys have any respect for anyone, including yourselves. Because, I really believe that if you did, you would make some kind of an effort to be semiliterate.



Scene 4: Moments Later.

April: We told you we don't know how to do this stuff.

Other Students: Yeah, that's right.

Eric: Whoa, don't know how to do this stuff. People, this is a review from the 6th and 7th grades. This test right here. You're supposed to know this stuff. No, wait a minute. That's perfect, because it's right where your behavior is, at the 6th grade level.

Eric: *(reacting to the students who respond in protest)* Excuse me! Stop right there. In case you guys are hoping for a comeback of full service gas stations or a boom in the fast food industry hiring a lot of you, you're not going to be able to have a job. Because, you know why? You can't even fill out a job application with your writing skills.

Yvonne: You-hoo, Mr. Vaughn, are we going to go over this test or not?



Scene 5: Moments Later.

Eric: No, we're not going to go over this test. We are already three weeks behind. Leslie?

Leslie: Mr. Vaughn, if you don't go over this stuff with us, we're never going to learn it.

Eric: Okay, you guys want to go over it? We will go over it. I'll take the answers, I'll post them right here so those of you that care can come up on your own and check them out.



Scene 6: Moments Later.

Corey: Man, you can't teach. You talk about caring, all you care about is your paycheck. You're just like the rest of them.

Eric: Oh, so Mr. Mendenhall wants to get judgmental on me. I make the judgments around here, and I'm going to make a judgment right now. Just let me find ... oh, here it is. Mr. "F," there's my judgment to you, sir. An "F" *(Eric announces the grade to the whole class and drops the test paper on Corey's desk. Students respond with an outburst, and Eric storms out of the classroom slamming the door behind him. Students clap as he leaves.)*



Scene 7: Later the Same Day. At Home.

- Susan:** (*his wife*) What's your problem? You haven't said two words since you came home.
- Eric:** I have had a horrible day.
- Susan:** What?
- Eric:** I got out on a kid. I embarrassed him. I mean, I took his paper and held it up in front of the whole class and said, "F" paper. Just because he said something to irritate me, and I tried to embarrass him. You know, the more I think about it, the way these kids are not at the level they're supposed to be at, I mean, how do they get to this point? I mean, don't they teach them anything in the lower grades? They should not be as unprepared as they are when they come to me. It's not worth it to me, you know. At the end of this year, I think I'll just get out of it (*teaching*).
- Susan:** Oh, now, wait a minute. You have to stick this out. Remember your old job, you complained constantly.
- Eric:** Yeah ...
- Susan:** Didn't like it, and now you're going to go through this again?
- Eric:** There has to be a way for me. I just don't know. What am I going to do? I can't handle it. The stress is killing me.
- Susan:** Why don't you go call Gary and play some ball. It will clear your head.
- Eric:** Okay, thanks. Sorry.



Scene 8: An Hour Later. The School Gym.

- Eric:** Gosh (*falling down as he is guarding Gary who drives to the basket*)!
- Gary:** Man, what's wrong with you today, Eric?
- Eric:** NOTHING!! ...
- Gary:** What's on your mind? ... This is not like you.
- Eric:** Man, I screwed up today. In class, I got out on a kid. He smarted off to me, and I got out and embarrassed him in front of the whole class. Man, then I just stormed out of the room. Man, I don't know what to do. I mean, what do I do when I go in there tomorrow?
- Gary:** Hey, you just pick up where you left off and put it all behind you. That's all you have to do, man.
- Eric:** I guess. My head's just a mess about it. I'm just, I'm distraught over how these kids are. I don't know, Gary, I'm thinking about apologizing.
- Gary:** No, Eric, I wouldn't apologize, okay? An apology at this time-it's a sign of weakness, and it makes you vulnerable to the kids. Don't apologize, Eric. Just go on in there and pick up where you left off. Let's play ball, come on.



Scene 9: The Next Day. 9th Grade English Class.

Student: Hey, everybody, here comes Mr. Vaughn.

Eric: Okay, get out your books and turn to page 124. We're going to start a new unit.

Student: Here we go again (*whispering to the student seated behind her*).



Scene 10: Moments Later.

Eric: Wait a minute. Put your books away. I need to say something. First of all, I want to apologize to the class for walking out of the room. And Corey, I need to apologize to you. I should not have showed your paper to the rest of the class. I shouldn't have gone there. I know you're angry at me. That's cool, but I just want you to know that it will never happen again. If we need to start over, if we need to review, I'm willing to go there. If we just need to take a little more time over each unit, I'm willing to go there, too. But, I think it needs to start with you guys. You need to give me some help. Maybe we can brainstorm. In other words, just start giving me ideas. No idea will be unacceptable. Okay, just start giving them to me right now. What should we do?

Shay: The day before the test, we should have some kind of review.

Eric: Review, cool.

Dexter: I have an idea.

Eric: Just start bringing them to me.