

Let's talk about sex

Mark Sergeant on an unusual demonstration, and the media's role in the fallout

On 21 February Professor J. Michael Bailey held a slightly unusual lecture and practical demonstration as part of his popular human sexuality class at Northwestern University (NU). Professor Bailey invited Ken Melvoin-Berg to present material on 'networking for kinky people'. During this presentation, one of Melvoin-Berg's associates, Faith Kroll, was stimulated to orgasm in front of a class of students by what has been described as a motorised sex toy. 'I was more than happy to,' she said. 'We had fun with it. I'm an exhibitionist.' Jim Marcus, one of the other presenters in the session, insisted 'what we did was not designed to titillate people, but to educate people,' and noted that there was an accompanying discussion on safety and consent issues.

Such lectures and demonstrations are a regular feature of Professor Bailey's human sexuality class, and cover a wide range of topics. Professor Bailey stated: 'This year, for example, we have had a panel of gay men speaking about their sex lives, a transsexual performer, two convicted sex offenders, an expert in female sexual health and sexual pleasure, a plastic surgeon, a swinging couple.' He added: 'The students find the events to be quite valuable, typically, because engaging real people in conversation provides useful examples and extensions of concepts students learn about in traditional academic ways.'

Attendance at these after-class demonstrations and lectures are purely voluntary and, in the case of the 21 February demonstration, the students were repeatedly warned in advance that it would be explicit. Of the 567 students in the class, around 100 decided to attend the after-class activities and, according to Professor Bailey, 'Student feedback for this event...was uniformly positive'.

It was, perhaps, inevitable though that word of this unusual class would reach

the attention of the wider press, given the number of students who could have spread the word via social networking sites such as Facebook. A number of blogs and online news forums also picked up coverage soon after the event, and some even compared the event, in a light-hearted manner, to the sex education scene from Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, where John Cleese delivers a 'practical demonstration' of intercourse to a class.

The demo has, however, caused some degree of controversy within NU as well as being picked up by other media outlets in the US and around the world (see tinyurl.com/4g9ulu6). Morton Schapiro, the President of NU, also issued a formal statement outlining that 'Many members of the Northwestern community are disturbed by what took place on our campus. So am I.'

This contrasts with some media outlets reporting that initial responses from NU administrators to Professor Bailey's activities were 'approving but cautious' (tinyurl.com/4lwgn8). Although it would be wrong to suggest that negative media attention is the primary cause of the concern now expressed by NU, it could possibly be a contributing factor.

This is also not the first time that Professor Bailey has courted controversy with his teaching and research activities. His 2003 book *The Man Who Would Be Queen* caused heated debate within some parts of the transsexual community (tinyurl.com/3mt65r6). Based on the negative issues generated by this book

it is very unlikely that Professor Bailey decided to deliberately run the demonstration in order to get media attention, and he has gone as far as stating that 'I have not enjoyed the press, because I have assumed that reporters will sensationalise what happened and will not provide my side'.

President Schapiro promised to 'investigate fully the specifics of this incident, and also clarify what constitutes appropriate pedagogy, both in this instance and in the future'. This raises an important issue of issue academic freedom, debated in the student newspaper at NU (tinyurl.com/3nrmlldl). In an editorial, *The Daily Northwestern* says that Schapiro is perfectly within his rights to make a critical statement to the media, is under no obligation to defend Professor Bailey in the press and is also

within his rights to order Professor Bailey's teaching to be investigated. However, the editorial argues that NU should not be able to dictate what Professor Bailey, or indeed any other member of staff, teaches: 'NU professors must have the power to exercise academic freedom and teach even the most controversial viewpoints in their research fields'. This, they warn, would set a dangerous precedent of control over what material should, and can, be taught.

This issue of academic freedom has recently been addressed by the British Psychological Society over the decision to have Professor Ken Zucker deliver a keynote address at the Division of Clinical Psychology (DCP) Annual Conference. Professor Zucker is seen by some as a controversial figure in the field of sex and sexuality research, and has been the focus of criticism and protest in the past. While the DCP is aware of the controversy surrounding Professor Zucker, they felt it was important to publicly debate his views.

It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the appropriateness of either Professor Bailey's teaching activities or the research of Professor Zucker, though these issues should be explored and debated in other forums. It is however appropriate to echo the argument that open and free debate should lie at the heart of academia. In the age of social networks and rolling media coverage, it is perhaps appropriate that academics should bear potential media fallout in mind. Indeed, as we go to press, news breaks of another US academic who has allegedly hired strippers to perform lap dances in a seminar on business ethics (tinyurl.com/vbadidea).

