Professors get lesson in student sensitivities

UTD art incident part of ‘chilling effect’ on classroom free speech, educators say

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RICHARDSON — Professor Robert Nelsen warned students that what they were about to see might offend them. Then, as he has done for years, he showed Robert Mapplethorpe’s photos of nude males, some in risqué poses.

His goal, he said, was not to shock but to teach students about obscenity and censorship battles in the arts.

Dr. Nelsen’s lesson at the University of Texas at Dallas didn’t go as planned.

A student who believed that the pictures were sinful threatened to file a formal complaint. College administrators let the student drop Exploration of the Arts — a required class for freshmen — and take something else.

A complaint was not put in the professor’s file, but Dr. Nelsen said damage to academic freedom was done by last month’s incident.

The professor, who has taught for 14 years, said the incident confirmed what he has sensed for several years: Students have become less tolerant of what their professors teach.

“I feel more stifled,” Dr. Nelsen said. “I don’t feel free to actually challenge students’ intellect, because they’ll shut down.”

Other professors across the country agree, citing similar experiences. They say changing student attitudes have forced them to alter what they talk about or show on a slide projector.

“It is producing a chilling effect on the free speech of professors in the classrooms,” said Dr. Joan Scott, chairwoman of the American Association of University Professors’ academic freedom and tenure committee.

And the professors say the erosion has affected both ends of the political spectrum. Conservative students have complained if professors show photos of nudes or lecture on gay rights. Liberal students have spoken

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...out against professors who present more conservative views on affirmative action or other issues, said Dr. Eugene Rice of the American Association for Higher Education.

Dr. Rice, a former dean and professor, directs a forum on faculty concerns for the Washington, D.C., group.

"You get it on the left and the right," he said. "It isn't all coming from conservative students."

Professors say various factors are prompting students to speak out, particularly colleges' marketing strategy to treat students more as consumers, and students' reaction to that trend.

Students also seem more focused on getting something concrete — like a job — out of college and more insistently that they should learn what they want to learn.

In an annual survey called "The American Freshman," most students rank material ends as their chief reason for going to college.

Focused on jobs

In the most recent poll, more than 70 percent of those surveyed said getting a job was more important than getting a college degree. Sixty percent said getting an education was among their reasons.

The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles surveyed 261,217 freshmen at 462 colleges for the poll. In the past, the survey has shown more students listing an education as a reason for going to college. The figure peaked at 71 percent in 1977.

"Taken as a whole, the freshman survey suggests that students today are more likely to view college as a means to an end," said Dr. Linda Sax, the survey director. "In some ways, I don't blame them. That's the way college is advertised to them. Attend this college, and you'll get into the best graduate school or get the best job."

There are also organized attempts to dispute some of what is said in the classroom.

For the last four years, the conservative Family Research Council has conducted workshops at its Washington, D.C., headquarters to train college students to "defend their faith, the family and freedom," said Robert Knight, the group's senior director of cultural studies.

Mr. Knight wrote The Age of Consent: The Rise of Relativism and the Corruption of Popular Culture, a 1998 book that describes the secular call to moral decline in arts and film.

"Maybe they should go back to teaching the classics," Mr. Knight said of professors. "Do students really have to become acquainted with the raunchier side of pop culture to advance their learning? They don't have the decency to know where the line is, someone has to draw it for them. Often, it's up to the students to do this, too, but they don't want to."

Professor Robert Nelsen teaches Exploration of The Arts at the University of Texas at Dallas.

He has shown photos by the controversial artist Robert Mapplethorpe for years in his art class, and he is careful to say the photos might offend students.

"I don't know whether it's art," he said. "I know each and every one of you has to decide for yourself. If you are completely closed-minded, you are not doing justice to the work. You're just not in this whole class trying to get out of it."

Dr. Nelsen said he had warned the offended student to stay in class. He said he wanted students to judge pictures based on knowledge of the work and artists.

"How do I now present material to students who are increasingly conservative? I don't know," he said. "What are these students prepared to handle?"

Professor Dr. Deanie Kratz, dean of the UT-Dallas school of arts and humanities, said he sees no evidence of an increasing number of conflicts over what professors teach.

"To me, educators are professional troublemakers. We're trying to make the students happy or comfortable," Dr. Kratz said. "We're going to be constantly engaging them with things that make them go into new kinds of thinking."

Professors say the incidents are happening more often than college administrators realize. They say such problems began about a decade ago, not long after a controversy over the streaming of the film Song of Horror.

Dr. Mapplethorpe died in 1989, a year before the collection of his photographs as exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Shortly after the exhibit opened, the museum's director was arrested on charges of violating obscenity laws. The museum and its director were acquitted in the trial, the first of its kind in America.

The Mapplethorpe trial really got things going," said Dr. Wendy Steiner, an English professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "People are blaming symbolic structures like the arts, gone and television for behavior in a way that they didn't used to do. They used to feel people were responsible for their actions."

Dr. Steiner, a sociologist at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, said she has been asked to speak on campus about Mapplethorpe's work.

"The college is a microcosm of the political system of this country," Dr. Penner said. "If you can't in class have political conservatives and radicals talk it out rationally, what's going to happen when they grow up and become senators or congressman or women?"

Dr. Nelsen asked students to think through their thoughts after the complaint about the Mapplethorpe work. He said few students said anything, other than to comment that they liked the class.

In a subsequent lecture, he continued his talk on debates over what is or isn't art. He showed slides of The Holy Virgin Mary, Chris Ofili's painting of the Madonna splattered with elephant dung. The work was in an exhibit that