

CASE STUDY 11.1

Ken Kelly

Ken Kelly looked out across the four neat rows at his twenty-four ninth-grade students. Each seemed to have one eye on the clock and the other on the door.

After spending a week lecturing about simple economic principles, Ken was trying to engage the group in a discussion of the differences between free and planned economic systems.

Communism had been unraveling in eastern Europe for months, and Ken had asked his students to watch the news each night so that they could see the shortcomings of that system. The students were showing by their written assignments that they understood the issues, but still they were slow to open up in class and discuss them. Ken's questions elicited only simple, two- or three-word answers.

He looked out at the sea of empty faces and pushed on. "Christie, who owns the factories in communist countries, private businesspeople or the government?"

"The government?" Christie answered, hesitatingly.

"Exactly. Very good. Any why's that? Because, as we studied last week, the governments of communist countries own the means of . . ." Ken waited for a second, hoping someone would volunteer the answer. "Of . . .of what? Carlos?"

"Production."

"Exactly. Production. Good, Carlos." Ken got up from his desk and paced across the front of the room.

"And who owns the means of production in the United States? Who owns the factories here? Tell us, Craig."

"Private people do. Lee Iacocca."

"Half right, half wrong, Craig. The stockholders own Chrysler Motors. Iacocca is president of the company. Remember, we talked about stocks last week? Now, tell us which system you think is better. Should factories be owned by the government or by . . ."

"Yeah. The government," Craig said.

"Hold on, Craig. Don't interrupt. We've already heard from you. Let's hear from someone else. Besides, you should wait until I finish my question. You can't answer a question until I tell you what it is. So, should factories be owned by the government or only by the people who can afford to buy them? Should we be able to have private property as we have here in the United States, or should the property belong to the government so that it

can be shared equally by the people? Jessie, how about you? You've been quiet all day. What's your answer?"

Silence.

"Jessie?"

"I like it like we have here."

"OK. Why?"

"You should have to earn what you own."

"Excellent. Good answer. Does anybody disagree?"

Silence.

"Anybody?"

More silence. Several students shifted uneasily in their seats or found ways to occupy themselves. Keith, a typically inattentive student who also was captain of the Littleton High School junior varsity track team, stared at the clock with a hand on his wrist, apparently taking his pulse. In front of him, Maria worked attentively on a braid in her hair.

"Keith! Tell us. What are the advantages of a planned economy? The government can control prices, right? Give me another one. Come on. You should have read this in your text last night."

"Taxes are lower? Ah, no. I mean . . ."

"Oh, really? You want to show me where you read that in the text? Tara, Keith said taxes are lower in a controlled economy. Is that right?"

"I'm sorry," Tara responded. "I couldn't hear the question. May I go to the girls' room?"

Ken walked across the classroom and stood behind the lectern by his desk. "This isn't working," he thought. "These kids know this material, but they won't talk about it meaningfully. They're just not interested."

His anger growing, Ken decided to change his tactics. "Maybe if they saw that the alternative to a discussion is a test, it would motivate them to open up," he thought.

"All right. Everyone take out a pen and a piece of paper," Ken said. "Write your name at the top of the paper, and answer the question I just asked. Should property be owned privately or by the government? You've got until the end of the period."

* * *

Ken collected the papers and walked from the classroom when the bell rang, annoyed that he had to resort to the test and bewildered about why his students were pulling back from him. He remembered that discussions in the first few weeks of class were more lively, but participation gradually declined until only one or two regulars spoke up anymore. "These are all bright kids, all in the upper tracks of their class," he thought. "Many of them are friends, which should make them feel at ease in the classroom and facilitate discussion."

Ken was free for the next two periods. He headed for a nearby elementary school, where he usually ate lunch with a friend who taught there. Walking down the hallway on his way to the cafeteria, Ken saw Sybil Avilla, a teacher in the gifted program who had been teaching philosophy to her gifted students in the elementary school and was now using the same method in regular elementary classes.

Ken had been skeptical when he heard that philosophy would be taught to third- and fourth-graders. Now, still festered at the way his last class had gone, he wondered how students that young could be engaged in philosophical discussions if he couldn't get his ninth-graders to discuss simple economic systems. But Avilla's class had been gaining a reputation among teachers. Ken decided to skip lunch and drop in.

He looked into the classroom and waved at Sybil. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Avilla. I'm Ken Kelly. I teach social studies at the high school. I've heard about your class, and I'm free now. Mind if I sit in a corner and watch? I've been meaning to stop by to see how you do this."

"Sit in a corner, or sit in our circle. We're happy to have you, Mr. Kelly," Avilla responded. "I've had several teachers from the middle school in here already. You're my first high school teacher. Take a seat anywhere."

The period was just beginning, and the seventeen fourth-grade students were settling into chairs that had been arranged in a circle. Sybil, sitting with the children in the circle, turned her attention back to the class.

"Last week, I asked you to think about this question: Would you be different if your name were different?"

Several students began speaking at once. "Just one, please," Sybil said, nodding toward a girl with her hand in the air. "Maria?"

"I was thinking about it the other day," Maria said. "Actually, it depends. Because if you have a name and somebody starts to tease you about it, well that might change your attitude. And you might be a different person. Or you might do different things."

From her seat in the circle, Sybil held up a book. "Well, this is a book about a name. And while I read it to you, I'd like you to think about that question—would you be you if you had a different name? The book is called *The Bear Who Wanted to Be a Bear*."

Sybil began reading. "Leaves were falling from the trees. Flocks of wild geese high above were flying south. The brown bear felt a cool wind on his fur. He was feeling very sleepy. . . ."

Sybil read for ten minutes from the book, which described a bear who wakes after a hibernation to find that a factory has been built in the forest over his den. He tries to convince the factory officials that he's a bear, but they say he's only "a lazy, unshaven worker in a fur coat" and order him to work on an assembly line. The bear works through the spring and summer at the factory, coming to believe he may not be a bear. The following fall, as

a new hibernation season begins, the bear begins falling asleep on the job. He's fired and eventually finds his way back to a den in the woods to sleep through the winter.

Sybil closed the book and looked up.

"I wouldn't forget I'm a bear," Rita said, leaning forward into the circle.

Sybil asked, "Why?"

"Because even after an amount of years, I wouldn't forget. I'm a bear. I would look like a bear, even if I shaved."

Kathy raised her hand and began talking. "But if you were in a totally different environment, would you still act the same? Would you think you still looked the same? I mean, maybe there weren't any mirrors. Maybe there was just one, to shave or something. So how would you know you were still a bear and not a person working in a factory like everyone else?"

Craig, who had raised his hand when Kathy did and responded to Sybil's nod, spoke next. "If I were surrounded by machines, and all I did was press a button all day long, I really wouldn't think about my normal activities because I'd be concentrating on pushing the buttons. So I'd think I looked the same and acted the same as everyone in the factory."

Rita shook her head. "Well, I'd remember that I was a bear at least."

"But you'd be surrounded by humans," Kathy said.

A chorus of voices filled the room. Sybil raised her voice above the din, nodding toward one of the children. "Go ahead, Camille."

"I know how it feels. I'm surrounded at home by grown-ups and sometimes I feel like I'm a grown-up, and so I do grown-up sorts of things because everybody around my house is grown-up."

"So that brings us to the question we asked last year," Sybil said, turning again toward Camille. "Would you be you if you had white skin?"

Camille thought for a moment. "Well . . ."

Several students began talking at once.

Sybil held up her hand. "Wait. Wait. Just let her think for a second."

Camille went on, "Yes. You'd have the same personality. It's like on Halloween. When you dress up as somebody else. But you're not that person."

"But that's temporary. It's not for a long time. If it was permanent, would you be you?" Mickey's voice rose as he finished.

Terrell responded, "Yes and no. You wouldn't be yourself because you'd have white skin. But you would be yourself because you'd do what you normally do."

Maya, who had been listening quietly, leaned forward and spoke to Terrell. "What if you were in a completely different environment? Say you moved to California and became a kid star. And every morning you'd go to work. And you didn't go to school. You got a tutor every afternoon, at lunch break. Would you still be you? Would you still run around and play and everything? Or would you be practicing your lines all the time and every-

thing? You'd probably have a different personality if you were always around a different environment."

Terrell started to respond, "Well, yeah, but . . ." and was interrupted as several students began speaking and several hands went into the air. Sybil interjected again. "Let him finish. Then we'll get to you. Put your hands down for a second."

Terrell continued with the series of questions he had been formulating. "You'd forget that you used to live in this town? You would forget that you were white? You'd forget that you have to go to school every day? You would forget all that stuff?"

Paula spoke next, "You wouldn't forget it. But it wouldn't be a part of you anymore, so you'd change from how you are now. If you lived in a different environment, then your personality or whatever you thought or think would be different."

"When I lived in Florida, everybody was kind of shy and didn't speak up," Allison began. "So I was shy and I didn't speak up. But then I moved to the north, and all the kids say what they think and what they want to do. So that's what happened to me. It just changed my life totally. Because now I can speak out and say what I want to. Before, I was holding everything in. So you change with your environment."

Sybil addressed the whole group, "If that's true, then we shouldn't be surprised that the bear didn't know he was a bear. Can you make that connection with me now? Do you follow me?"

Several students nodded, and Sybil continued, "If what Allison just said is true, if you accept her statement, then we could understand why the bear didn't know he was a bear. Even though we know he was a bear. So is your beariness or your humanness an outside thing or an inside thing? Who determines what you are? Sonya, good to see your hand up."

Sonya smiled at Sybil as she began to speak. "Well, if you have friends that are rich and other friends that are not too rich, you hang around with the rich people. You'll become like them. You'll act like you're rich."

"So is your personality defined by other people?" Sybil asked.

Sally, whose hand had been up for several minutes, said, "No, it's not. Because if you hang around with rich people, it's not like you're rich. You can act like them, but you're only pretending."

Again, Sybil responded with a question. "So then what is it that makes you who you are?"

Sally continued, "Only you should. Yourself. Suppose some kids are from rich families, and you go and hang around with them. Say they're really 'Jappy,' and they talk like 'Like, totally, and for sure.' And say you start to talk like that. That won't be good. If you hang around people that aren't like you and you become like them, then don't try to go back to your old friends. Because they'll see you've changed a lot, and they won't like you."

As Sally paused, Sybil said, "I'm sorry. We have to stop right now. The period is about to end."

Several students spoke up in protest.

Sybil stood and waved her hand to quiet the chatter. "Wait a moment," she said. "Just because we're done with this in class doesn't mean you should stop talking about it later. I would like you to talk about this with whomever you have dinner with tonight. Try to remember the story of *The Bear Who Wanted to Be a Bear*. And I want you to talk about what it is that makes us human. Is it other people who define us, like they defined the bear? Or do we define ourselves? And if we define ourselves, then how come we change when we're with different kinds of people, as we've been talking about? Or maybe who you are can change."

The chatter among the students continued as they reorganized their desks back into rows. A few approached Sybil and began explaining their ideas about the discussion. After a minute, Sybil waved the remaining students toward their seats and gathered her materials as the regular fourth-grade teacher returned to the classroom. Motioning Ken to follow her, she said, "We can meet in my office across the hall."

As they walked from the room, Sybil turned to Ken and asked, "So, Ken is it? How did you enjoy the class? Different, don't you think?"

"There's no doubt you had them going. I haven't heard that much from any of my students, particularly in my ninth-grade global studies class, since the semester began. But . . ." Ken stopped himself short.

Sybil seemed to sense his hesitation. "But what, Ken?"

"Well, where's the teaching? You didn't do anything. You said only a few words, and the kids just . . . talked."

"If you assume that teaching is telling, you're right," Sybil responded. "I tell them very little in this class. But if what you want to do is create a community of inquiry, you have to assume that a teacher's opinion stands as only one. My job is to get students actively talking together and doing their own thinking, not to get my agenda across."

"Agenda? We've got to be realistic, Sybil. The school district and the state have given us an agenda—the curriculum. At the end of next year, my global studies students will have to take the state curriculum exam. need to cover the world with them in just two years, and I don't think I could do it using freewheeling, open-ended discussions very often."

"Certainly you've got to help your students prepare for the exam," Sybil said, "but you also can use the Socratic technique you just saw. A good teacher needs many techniques. A teacher delivers a lecture when it's important to get a lot of information across in a hurry, but there are times when the teacher has to be more of a coach, a facilitator of information. There are times when it's appropriate for students to listen and take notes, and times when they should participate more actively: talk, respond, react,

analyze, personalize, think. That's what these dialogues are for. Every teacher could use them, in any subject."

"Every teacher?" Ken asked. "Maybe there's a place for these dialogues in some of the social sciences I teach, but how could they be used in the hard sciences, or math? Kids won't learn long division by sitting in circles chatting with each other about it. C'mon, Sybil. Aren't you stretching the point?"

Sybil started to respond but then paused. She shrugged and said, "Maybe so, Ken. I probably do stretch the point." Ken wasn't sure if she was angry or not, and he didn't know what to say next. He watched Sybil organize materials for her next class.

"It's a valid technique, Sybil. I enjoyed watching you work at it. And thanks for talking to me. I don't know if I could ever give up so much control. I don't know if it would work for me."

"Maybe that's true," Sybil responded. "It's interesting, isn't it? The children adore this method, and the teachers are scared to death of it. To make it work, teachers have got to change their point of view, to look at their place in education. They've got to be genuinely interested in asking questions for which they're not looking for the almighty right answer all the time. It's tough to do."

Ken nodded good-bye and headed for the teacher's lounge, hoping to find the friend with whom he usually ate lunch. He needed another reaction to what he'd just observed, but the room was nearly empty. Ken bought a sandwich and a soda from the vending machine and took a seat at an empty table. He opened the newspaper he carried with him but found his thoughts continually returning to Sybil Avilla's classroom.

"I'm a teacher, not a talk-show host," he said half out loud. "I've got to get through a mountain of curriculum—the history of the eastern and western worlds—and she wants me to suspend the lessons every fourth or fifth day so that I can let my kids just chat about it.

"There may be no right answers in Sybil's classes, but when my tenth graders sit down to take the state curriculum exam next June, they'll need to know a lot of right answers. And they're not going to find those answers sitting in circles and talking some bear through an identity crisis."

Ken picked up the newspaper again and thumbed to the sports pages, but his thinking returned to Sybil's class. "Certainly, there are arguments for what Sybil does," he thought. "Clearly, the class was more lively than any of mine have been in a while. But so much of what she does, or doesn't do, contradicts some of the basic strategies I studied in education classes; her lesson had no real advance organizer. It needed more closure. She never praised a right answer. She never corrected an incorrect one. The obvious point of the lesson was that only you can define the kind of person you are. But when a few of the kids said exactly that, she didn't even acknowledge them. Kids need that feedback.

“And the class lasted forty minutes, but only half the kids said anything at all. I’m not sure the other half were even listening. I don’t think they got anything out of it. She never called on kids, even those that were obviously daydreaming. And when the discussion wandered, she never stepped in to bring it back. I wonder, really, what Sybil’s kids learned today.”

Ken looked down at his unread newspaper and then at his watch. He picked up the paper and his trash from lunch, tossed them into the garbage, and headed back toward the high school for his afternoon classes. “She’s just too radical,” he thought as he swung open the door from the elementary school and let it close gently behind him.