

Teaching sensitive material: A multi-disciplinary perspective

ABSTRACT

Many disciplines require a curriculum that encompasses sensitive content. Our capacity to respond to this content appropriately as educators is crucial to student attainment of discipline-specific professional competencies as well as students' capacity to serve future clients and communities. Appropriate preparation for future professional lives that will inevitably touch upon sensitive issues is also critical for students' resilience. In this paper, seven tertiary educators from a range of disciplines consider learning and teaching in relation to sensitive issues. This paper draws on our own teaching experiences and the research literature to argue that, while teaching sensitive subject matter can present risks to students, it has profound benefits for students' development and future professional work. We argue that there is considerable consensus in published research – as well as among ourselves – about strategies to support student learning and minimise risk, together with a limited number of areas that remain controversial both in practice and in the literature. We provide practical information directed toward managing the risks presented by teaching sensitive issues. We contend that addressing sensitive content is a professional responsibility for teachers, disciplines and universities.

AUTHORS

Mary Heath

Flinders Law School,
Flinders University

Clemence Due

School of Psychology,
The University of Adelaide

Wendy Hamood

School of Animal and
Veterinary Science, The
University of Adelaide

Amanda Hutchinson

School of Psychology,
Social Work and Social
Policy, University of
South Australia

Tania Leiman

Flinders Law School,
Flinders University

Kerry Maxfield

School of Psychology,
Social Work and Social
Policy, University of
South Australia

Jane Warland

School of Nursing and
Midwifery, University of
South Australia

Introduction

The meaning of 'sensitive' topics in the higher education context has not been clearly defined. In this paper we adapt Lee's definition of sensitive research, which proposes that a sensitive issue is any topic 'laden with emotion or which inspires feelings of awe or dread' (Lee, 1993, p. 6).

In exploring this definition, we draw on our extensive experience as seven educators from the three South Australian universities. We teach in disciplines including law, midwifery, psychology, social work and veterinary science. Our teaching addresses issues such as pregnancy loss, rape, domestic violence, child abuse, mental illness, serious physical injury, animal cruelty, euthanasia, drug abuse, culturally sensitive issues and suicide. Complex and painful emotions can arise for students and the people they will work with in their future professional lives in relation to issues such as these. Students may also experience stress associated with a profound sense of responsibility for the welfare of others facing trauma, cruelty or violence. It is vital that students are prepared for dealing with such challenging situations in their future professional practice through the inclusion of such subject matters within undergraduate curricula. Indeed, we contend that professional competency requires capacity to address sensitive issues. However, teaching sensitive material has the potential to affect both student and teacher well-being, and, therefore, teachers' delivery of this material and response to student interactions must be carefully considered.

This paper considers the risks and benefits of teaching sensitive content, beginning from the premise that learning must be central. We argue that high-quality learning experiences in relation to sensitive topics are crucial to developing student resilience in both classroom and workplace settings where these topics will inevitably arise. Students need to be taught in a way that supports the acquisition of skills and attributes necessary to thrive in future professional life and practice. We therefore contend that teaching sensitive topics in a manner that supports both student and teacher welfare should be understood as a disciplinary and institutional responsibility rather than simply the duty of a few passionate and committed educators. We go on to explore key issues that should be considered

by those involved in curriculum development and delivery, drawing on the literature and our diverse teaching experience to provide practical guidance for others teaching sensitive subject matters.

TEACHING SENSITIVE CONTENT: RISKS, BENEFITS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Sensitive content matter can present risks for students and teaching staff, especially those who are vulnerable, sometimes due to personal connection with the content. The totality of traumatic experience present among students in our classrooms will never be disclosed. This is desirable for a range of reasons, including students' entitlement to privacy. However, it is highly likely that our classes contain students whose lives have been touched by trauma and who may accordingly be concerned about or affected by the subject matter we teach (Carello & Butler, 2014; Oberman, 2012). In any cohort, there is likely to be a spectrum of student response to sensitive content, from personal distress through to indifference or callousness and a wide range of responses in between. Individuals with a personal connection with course material may experience re-traumatisation (Carello & Butler, 2014; Cunningham, 2004; Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015; Mummert, Policastro & Payne, 2014), while students who lack previous exposure may find sensitive content overwhelming for other reasons (Cunningham, 2004).

Risks to academics are associated with managing student response to course content, and subsequent emotional labour, in teaching environments where clear boundaries, guidelines and support are sometimes not available. Individual academics risk stress and burn out if support is not readily available and opportunities for debriefing are lacking (Koster, 2011). Teaching in isolation and the degree of familiarity and confidence with content may also contribute to academic vulnerability (Jackson et al.,

2013). Student disclosures triggered by sensitive subject matter increase the emotional burden and demands on academic time and workload (Branch, Hayes-Smith & Richards, 2011; Koster, 2011) Academics may not be adequately trained or clear about their responsibilities in dealing with student disclosure, yet student disclosure is identified as an important issue in the literature and has been encountered by all of the authors (Hayes-Smith, Richards & Branch, 2010; Koster, 2011). Challenging ethical issues can include making assessments of student safety; maintaining student confidentiality; complying with mandatory reporting obligations and potential legal liability (Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009; Koster, 2011). Addressing student disclosure appropriately may compromise career progression in an university environment where emotional labour is not formally recognised or rewarded and often falls to female staff: this team of authors was assembled after an invitation to participate was widely circulated and yet all those who responded are female (Bellas, 1999; Koster, 2011).

Sensitive subjects are not limited to core curriculum, but are also encountered, often unavoidably, in clinical and work-integrated learning settings, and later in professional contexts. Addressing these issues in supported learning environments and modelling ways of responding appropriately can realise benefits in both the short and long term. It recognises that we have a duty of care in relation to our students and that modelling professional practice in the context of this duty offers a learning opportunity. These learning experiences can increase students' capacity for emotional management and resilience in relation to sensitive topics and trauma-related material (Branch, Hayes-Smith & Richards, 2011). As Tarc (2013, p. 384) notes, 'careful redirection of students' emotion might support students to develop new thinking about themselves, the world and about others', helping them to learn critical skills for regulating emotions that can be applied to their future work.

As educators, we believe that our teaching must be consistent with our values of compassion, health promotion and responsibility; as well as with our ethical commitments to students' well-being, to the well-being of the people who may interact with students in their future professional roles, and to our disciplines and professional bodies (Carello & Butler, 2014; O'Callaghan, 2013). Professional training should equip students to become professionals who are sufficiently knowledgeable and empowered to recognise, respond or refer in relation to acts of violence or cruelty (Scriver & Kennedy, 2016; Green

& Gullone, 2005), and this cannot be done without addressing confronting content.

Students should be prepared to work with future clients from diverse backgrounds who may have different values to their own. Classes on sensitive material can provide spaces for students to hear and respectfully engage with opinions that may differ from or confront their own, an important skill in any professional or social environment. Educators have both a responsibility and an obligation to graduate students who are trauma-informed (Carello & Butler 2014, p. 264) and who are capable of interacting ethically and responding bravely in difficult conversations with clients and other professionals both within and outside their disciplines.

This is a responsibility for many areas of professional practice, formally encapsulated in professional codes of ethics, professional competency standards and the like. For example, social workers and psychologists are required to have an awareness of their own emotions, views and biases which may impact their professional practice (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010, clause 5.1.2; Australian Psychological Society, 2007). Veterinary graduates are expected to be 'resilient and confident in their own professional judgements to withstand the stresses and conflicting demands they may face in the workplace, know how to recognise the signs of stress and how to seek support to mitigate the psychological stress on themselves and others' (Australian Veterinary Boards Council Inc., 2016, Annex 6). Entry level lawyers must be able to demonstrate 'an awareness that mismanagement of living and work practices can impair the lawyer's skills, productivity, health and family life' (Legal Practitioners Education and Admission Council, 2016, p. 36).

TEACHING APPROPRIATELY AND WELL: MINIMISING RISKS AND MAXIMISING BENEFITS?

Sensitive material is part of many curricula, either implicitly or as a core component, because it is essential to student learning outcomes in the programmes in which we teach. How to teach sensitive material and whether to do so directly are choices teachers must make. The literature on trauma-informed teaching indicates the crucial role of student learning as our focus when engaging with sensitive subject matters (Carello & Butler, 2014). A learning-focused approach necessarily includes conscious design of the learning context and clear

strategies for minimising the potential adverse impacts of learning experiences on student well-being. Methodologies for teaching sensitive material range between a theoretical, rational or cognitive approach (an academic approach that typically denies an exploration of emotion) on the one hand and a more emotional, personal or applied approach on the other (Lowe, 2015; O'Callaghan, 2013). Taking a purely theoretical approach to teaching is particularly difficult in clinical areas or when preparing students for professional practice. In these situations, the distinction between the roles of clinician, therapist or practitioner and those of educator, teacher or academic may be blurred (Carello & Butler, 2014), especially in environments that are more difficult to predict and control, such as placements and clinical settings. Conversely, relying solely on an emotional or applied approach may neglect theory and skills critical for competent and/or evidence-based practice. Both practice-based knowledge and evidence-based knowledge are required for developing high levels of competence (Nilsen, Nordstrom & Ellstrom, 2012). The importance of preparing students for the workplace and their future professional lives highlights the necessity of seeking balance between the theoretical and the applied, the rational and the emotional, the head and the heart. In doing so, we value our students as well as their learning (O'Callaghan, 2013).

DESIGNING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Students have diverse backgrounds and experiences, and a high proportion may have histories of trauma or distressing life events. Student diversity may encompass a variety of cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, refugee experiences, mental health conditions and exposure to abuse and violence (Carello & Butler, 2014; Zurbriggen, 2011). Particularly for vulnerable students, the learning environment can have powerful effects in either supporting learning or operating as an obstacle preventing it (Carello & Butler, 2015). For example, students may feel victimised or question the legitimacy of their feelings as a consequence of poor class dynamics, the presence of unchallenged stereotypes (Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009), or when being taught by academics who lack cultural understanding or a realistic appreciation of subject content within the context of practice (Bassah, Seymour & Cox, 2014). While we cannot control students' vulnerabilities, we can identify strategies to maximise student learning by becoming trauma-

informed teachers (Carello & Butler, 2014). Choosing to adopt a 'strengths-based, person-centered and solution focused' practice (Carello & Butler 2015, p. 265) is important to avoid jeopardising learning.

The starting point for designing a learning environment for teaching sensitive material is to minimise harm. Careful planning of the explicit and implicit curriculum is required – reducing barriers to learning by reducing the risk of traumatisation, without removing material essential to the curriculum (Carello & Butler, 2015). Thoughtful choice of learning resources allows teachers to closely monitor the amount of exposure to traumatic material, 'maximising student resilience and reducing student risk' (Carello & Butler, 2015, p. 265). The degree of exposure to traumatic material and exposure to graphic detail increase the risk of re-traumatisation (Zurbriggen, 2011). Where guest speakers with personal experience of trauma are invited to talk to students, judgements need to be made as to the extent to which this serves an educational purpose, since first person accounts may also present a higher risk (Zurbriggen, 2011). The intensity of exposure to traumatic material should only be to the extent necessary for learning.

Curriculum planning should ensure students have advance notice of the general nature of the sensitive content (Newman, 2011; Jackson et al., 2013). In work-integrated or clinical settings, students need to know what they are likely to encounter: their preconceptions may not be accurate. 'Pre-briefing' needs to be measured, rather than overwhelming enough to produce a traumatic response (Zurbriggen, 2011). This process is crucial if robust debate, critical thinking and learning are to be possible (Heath, 2005; Oberman, 2012). All authors of this paper use pre-briefings of some kind, whether they amount to providing some form of 'warning' to students about the subject material beforehand, or a more extensive contextualised account of the prevalence of the issue to be discussed, the associated likelihood of class members having personal connections to the material, and an overt discussion of how the issue will be approached.

Providing students with sufficient predictability (Newman, 1999, 2011), choice about how they encounter material (in class, or online in a context of their choosing) (Zurbriggen, 2011), and strategies for managing potential distress can empower students whose learning may otherwise be jeopardised. Giving students the information they need to emotionally prepare for classes, including making the class aware that 'hidden survivors' will be present in class and

orienting them toward care for one another (Agllias, 2012) can make the class a safer environment for everyone. Providing key referral information students might wish to use or suggest to others is highly desirable (as discussed further below).

When we reflected on our own teaching through the preparation of individual written reflections, we all reported using practices designed to create protected space for the discussion of sensitive issues. Many of us see such practices as vital to the teacher's ability to negotiate or establish clear boundaries for discussion and a mutually respectful environment, particularly in contexts where students will share differing viewpoints and opinions. Negotiating how classes will run and what students can expect within them helps to create 'safer spaces' through open discussion. In turn 'safer spaces' ensure that students have a clear sense of how to convey respect, as well as an expectation that they will be respected. Some of us support these early strategies by following up with students after lectures or tutorials as needed, using humour where appropriate, and providing in-class support. These cues appear to promote an ongoing awareness of the potential sensitivity of the subject matter, as well as holding out a reminder to vulnerable students that their presence is assumed and they are cared for, with no expectation that students disclose anything.

Importantly, student disclosure of traumatic experience should never be required in classrooms (Carello & Butler, 2014). We cannot ensure a classroom environment will be a safe, confidential space in which to disclose (Zurbriggen, 2011). Moreover, some kinds of disclosure are inconsistent with learning objectives. For example, a disclosure of sexual assault may foreclose discussion essential to a critical understanding of a rape statute. Students who self-disclose may be seen by their classmates as 'taking over' the classroom discussion, trying to turn the tutorial into a therapy session, or directing the discussion away from the course outline, a perception which, in itself, represents a risk to students who disclose in class. Self-disclosure can be particularly concerning if it reveals that a student is facing an issue that is unresolved or causing ongoing distress. Teachers have 'a moral and ethical imperative to protect the student from revealing more than they might choose to reveal if in a less emotionally charged environment' (Willis & Leiman, 2013, p. 665).

While students should not be required to disclose personal experiences that may relate to the subject material, nor should teachers assume that students

can differentiate their own experiences and emotions from those of the people they encounter in readings, discussions or clinical settings (Carello & Butler, 2014). Rather, educators should teach and model these skills themselves (Gillam et al., 2014; Newman, 2011) with awareness of the demanding nature of this work. If discussion does become emotionally charged, it is an opportunity for the facilitator to model respectful, balanced responses and to demonstrate clear boundaries. Acknowledging that difficult feelings can surface when discussing sensitive topics normalises these responses. Within an inclusive and respectful classroom environment, the facilitator can model an empathic and caring response that maintains a focus on the client or subject matter of the class (Carello & Butler, 2015). Classroom environments that do become emotionally charged provide an opportunity for students to learn to '[manage] emotions to meet expected academic disciplinary or professional requirements, perform ethical behaviours or engage in critical analysis in an appropriate academic manner' (Willis & Leiman, 2013, p. 688).

In addition to assisting students to manage their own emotions, explicit teaching about 'the signs and symptoms of vicarious traumatisation' (Gilin & Kauffman, 2015, p. 389) can be crucial, especially in clinical settings. Vicarious trauma is an expected human response to 'repeated exposure to traumatic material' (Morrison 2007, pp. 3, 7). The student experience can be transformed by the inclusion of positive content in the curriculum, focusing on resilience and not only on difficulty, and offering accounts that show how professionals can make a difference in the context of trauma (Oberman, 2012; Zurbriggen, 2011). However, the potential impact on student learning when academics avoid attending to student emotional response (Kasman, Fryer-Edwards & Braddock, 2003) requires further research (Branch, Hayes-Smith & Richards, 2011; O'Callaghan, 2013).

Risk minimisation should be foregrounded when designing assessment (Carello & Butler, 2014). Potential harm to students can be exacerbated by setting assignments that invite students to disclose, even if that invitation is unintended (Carello & Butler, 2014). Careful thought should be given before choosing graphic material such as coroners' reports as the basis for assignment tasks, especially when less traumatic material might be equally effective. However, particular challenges also arise in clinical education, which might include role-plays, simulations or standardised clients, work placements and/or supervised practice (Babacan,

2015). Students may not heed teaching about the potential for vicarious trauma because they 'might be inclined to view the problem as likely to happen to others, but not them' or because they cannot imagine the situations that they may encounter in the course of future studies or later graduate practice (Heekin, 2015, p. 302). Emphasising graduate qualities, inherent requirements, threshold learning outcomes, codes of conduct or competencies for future professional practice may be helpful (see, for examples from law, Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010; Council of Australian Law Deans, 2012; Flinders University, 2013).

Finally, students should be provided with access to the contact details of support services, both on and off campus (Carello & Butler, 2014; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015), and invited to adopt self-care strategies (Zander, Hutton & King, 2010). Similarly, staff who teach sensitive material need to have access to strong mentoring and debriefing opportunities in addition to using self-care strategies (Gilin & Kauffman, 2015; Heath, 2005; Mummert, Policastro & Payne, 2014; Newman, 2011; Zurbriggen, 2011). Educators should be encouraged to develop networks across institutions with other teachers of sensitive topics as a source of peer support (Scriver & Kennedy, 2016) and for sharing teaching experiences (Danis, 2016).

CONTENTIOUS STRATEGIES?

While there is considerable agreement on the principles concerning best practice in teaching sensitive topics in both the literature discussed above and in our own experiences, some areas remain contentious. In particular, debate remains concerning voluntary disclosures. Student disclosure can represent a risk, as described above. However, it can also offer an opportunity to provide support or referral to counselling services (Branch, Hayes-Smith & Richards, 2011), enabling a teacher to let the student know that 'it's quite okay to seek professional help, it's very courageous of you to reach out'. Normalising help seeking is a strategy used across the teaching of all authors of this paper. Many of us discuss counselling services with students, providing details of the university's services and, in some cases, a list of community services that might be appropriate (and might be used by students in the wider community for future work). Some of us find that interventions that normalise help seeking can be beneficial in enabling students to resolve, or acquire skills that enable them to better manage, trauma in their own lives as students before moving into their professional lives. However,

contention remains about the degree to which this results in unclear boundaries and encourages students to rely on teaching staff rather than independently seeking help from university and external services. Agllias (2012) discusses providing a range of flexible, personalised support options for students, including access to academics for advice about referral options, while Scriver and Kennedy (2016, p. 11) propose that universities 'have a responsibility to clarify procedures for dealing with disclosure'.

Another situation attracting a diversity of opinions (both in the literature and among the authors) is responding to students who wish to leave the learning environment (or choose not to attend) as a strategy of self-care (Smith, 2014). Mummert, Policastro and Payne (2014), for example, would support students leaving the class in this context. None of the authors would prevent a student who wished to leave from doing so. However, most of us stated in our reflections that we would encourage students to stay or attend due to the benefits of engaging with sensitive material described earlier. For example, one of us wrote: 'I remind them that whilst they may want to leave that they are encouraged to stay', while another wrote: 'I tell them if you do find any of the material distressing, as good self-care it is okay to leave the lecture or tutorial'.

CREATING ACCESSIBLE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND EXPERIENCES

All of the authors aim to create classes that are accessible by planning classes with the sensitive nature of the subject matter and its potential impact on students in mind. We seek to address likely student concerns through careful design of the learning environment (without having the student placed in a position where they need to identify themselves to staff, where possible). In addition, all authors use learning technologies to assist our practice, recording materials and providing students with the option to watch sensitive materials in the privacy of their own homes, or catch-up with materials online if they choose not to attend. Some of us provide students with the opportunity to watch particularly confronting videos prior to the class, so that they can come prepared to discuss them face to face without the immediacy of needing to also deal with their emotional response to the visual content. One of us reflected 'I have found the ensuing discussion in class is much better with a bit of distance between the emotion of watching it and having some time to process what they have learned from watching it'. Research is required to determine how different

modes of delivery (online and face to face) might impact on student learning outcomes (Danis, 2016). Access to classes for all students is a central concern because, as one of us stated: 'This is an opportunity for students to understand the human dimensions of [our subjects]; to learn about other people's responses to the material we study as diverse and sometimes as having emotional dimensions; and to learn what might assist them to manage their own emotions and their responses to others' emotions'. Students may not be comfortable attending class when particular subjects are being discussed (such as suicide, sexual assault or the death of a baby). We hold a shared concern that these issues could not be avoided in the 'real world' of professional practice: while students may be able to avoid engaging with the material in our specific course, this may not be possible in professional life. As one of us stated, 'some students feel unable to attend classes on suicide and suicide assessment. I [support] this choice but also [tell] students that if they wish to work in counselling, psychology, or any of the helping professions, it is important that they are competent in assessing suicidal ideation and can engage with people during times of severe depression or other life difficulties. If unable to attend they need to consider when and where this training and preparation will occur'.

NEGOTIATING ROLE BOUNDARIES

Finally, many of us grapple with establishing boundaries between our roles as educators and as support people or counsellors to students. Even those of us who have formed a clear sense of this boundary, still constantly negotiate this with students, who may hold quite different expectations to our own. The literature offers a variety of perspectives (Agllias, 2012; Carello & Butler, 2014; Hayes-Smith, Richards & Branch, 2010). How and when to offer support to individual students was seen in the authors' reflections as fraught in the context of the classroom, particularly given that it is entirely possible that a number of the students in our classes have had experiences closely related to the content we were teaching. We believe that it is important to reinforce our primary role as educators, and not as counsellors or psychologists. This may be particularly important and challenging for those of us teaching psychology, counselling or social work. It can present quite specific challenges for staff who are supervising or responsible for students in clinical, work placement or work-integrated learning settings, whose teaching roles are not so readily understood as having the kind of boundaries implied in 'the classroom'. Some

of us offer students the option of speaking with us after class, and some of us provide students (especially those undertaking work placements) with an option to contact us out of hours. Others resist these strategies, and these decisions are context specific. However, we all reflected that acting as counsellor to students was not a desirable model when teaching sensitive subject materials. Most of us believe that the boundaries are not always clear, and are sometimes hard to maintain. This experience is well-reflected, but not resolved, in the literature (Smith, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The authors share the concern that teaching important sensitive material carries risk to students and affects ourselves. Yet this material is necessary for both the specific aims of the courses we teach (that is, in relation to intellectual engagement with the subject material and expected learning outcomes), and to prepare students for situations many will face as professionals. We argue it is vital this preparation occurs in educational settings: if it does not happen during undergraduate study, when will it happen?

While the issues are complex, it is incumbent upon educators to demonstrate that these topics can be discussed with courage, compassion and clarity. It is necessary for us to equip students to engage appropriately and on the basis of contemporary best practice with the challenging issues likely to be encountered in professional life, for the benefit of our students and the communities in which they will participate and work. As we have argued, these skills are essential for professional competence in a wide variety of disciplines. Therefore, ensuring students are adequately equipped with these skills should be recognised as the responsibility of disciplines and programmes of study, and not only of individual teachers. The work associated with teaching and addressing sensitive subject matters both within and outside the classroom is deserving of support and acknowledgement by universities.

Many students recognise the importance of addressing sensitive issues and acquiring the skills to do so. As one of us summarised in an early written reflection as part of our collaborative process:

My experience of teaching sensitive topics is that students appreciate addressing these issues openly and honestly . . . students feel more prepared for the work of helping others and engaging with challenging issues. Their ability to manage their own emotions is respected and supported.

Although teaching sensitive subject materials is challenging, and there is no single 'correct' way of supporting students to engage with these materials, considerable guidance is available from the research literature, assisting educators to plan for the design of effective, trauma-aware and mutually respectful learning experiences. In addition, the development of peer support networks should be encouraged for the benefit of sharing knowledge and improving the teaching experience (Scriver & Kennedy, 2016).

We should never assume that discussing sensitive issues is inherently educative or transformative: 'teaching about trauma is essential to comprehending and confronting the human experience, but to honour the humanity and dignity of both trauma's victims and those who are learning about them, education must proceed with compassion and responsibility toward both' (Carello & Butler, 2014, p. 164). Respectful teaching and learning about sensitive material can be transformative for both teachers and students and it can create the foundation upon which future professionals approach some of the most challenging issues facing our communities and our world.

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