

Using Traumatic Material in Teaching

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1. Abstract:

Student engagement is an important aspect of effective teaching and learning practice. Instructors have access to all sorts of learning objects to engage students in that teaching-learning dynamic. One particular learning object is the use of traumatic materials through objects such as movie clips, written works, guest speakers and the instructor's own experiential stories. This article will consider the use of traumatic materials in teaching and the need to reflect on the instructor's privilege in their choice of learning objects.

Key Words:

Teaching, traumatic materials, learning, learning objects, privilege, reflection

2. Introduction

I turned off the lights and was about to plug in a DVD when a voice rang out in the classroom. "This isn't going to make us cry like the video last week is it?" a student asked. My first thought was, "Yes, that was a very disturbing video." My second thought was, "My colleague was covering my class while I was away. I wonder how she handled presenting and debriefing this material?" I stopped, turned on the lights and asked the students about their experience of watching a mother abuse her children and the way in which she covered things up in the courts. Most students agreed that it was disturbing to watch, but necessary. They began to talk about the children, youth and families they will work with in their chosen field; hence, the relevance of seeing what their future clients have lived. After debriefing, before I turned off the lights, I assured the students that the DVD we were about to watch about two rambunctious little boys was not disturbing and at times quite humorous.

I have had experiences using traumatic material in the classroom and I have on occasion wondered what affect it has had on student learning. The interaction above, where the student asked if the video would make them cry, is a clear example that traumatic material does affect students. As a clinician who works with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), developed through my master's thesis, professional training and years of work in this area, I have come to understand that those who work with trauma are often effected by the stories they are told. This phenomenon of being effected by the client's traumatic material is known as Vicarious Traumatization, Secondary Traumatic Stress, or Compassion Fatigue (Figley, 2002; Figley, 1995; Pearlman & Maclan, 1995; Pearlman, & Saakvitne, 1995). As Figley (1995) explains, this hazard of the trade is a "by-product of caring" (p. 7). Those who choose to practice in this area are deeply affected.

This student interaction, mentioned above, solidified my need to understand the phenomenon of using traumatic material in the classroom. On occasion, I have had

discussions with other college instructors who use traumatic material in their teaching. I also wonder about the use of these materials and the effect this has on the student's learning. For example, during one discussion I had, the instructor thought it was a "great class" because the students were crying when they left his classroom. The instructor believed the emotional impact was significant, and therefore, the students had learned. While I agree that the impact likely was significant; I also wondered however, to what degree learning had actually taken place and to what degree does the emotional impact become too overwhelming to actually learn.

Memory experts would tell us that using information that is unusual, emotional and interesting is useful to help students understand the information a teacher may want to convey. Telling traumatic stories and using certain media with traumatic content certainly fits the criteria of being emotional, unusual and interesting. Using traumatic material is a pedagogical way to 'bring it home.' Therefore, it is understandable that instructors would resort to this method. It may even be a powerful, effective tool. Concerns relate to the affect on students and whether or not they may indeed experience some form of Compassion Fatigue or Vicarious Trauma after encountering this material.

While Compassion Fatigue tends to be used in relation to those who work with the traumatized it also relates to those who are "emotionally affected by the trauma of another" (Figley, 2002, p3.). One understanding I have about students who choose the human service industry is that they choose it because they want to help those who are hurting. My experience about students in general is that they are typically caring, empathic people. Exposure to traumatic material in the classroom is exposure to the trauma of another.

3. The Impact

I first wondered about the impact of traumatic material a few years ago during one of my counselling classes when a student began talking about a film she had watched, a few days previous, in another instructor's class, related to residential schools. This student talked about having difficulty sleeping, having difficulty removing the voice of the storyteller from her head, not wanting to eat and becoming more restless when she returned to that classroom. As I listened to the symptoms she listed, I became concerned about the effect this had on her and the potential for Vicarious Traumatization. It hit me for the first time that we may not be acting ethically with our students when we share traumatic material.

I am certainly not the first to think about this issue. In a journalism course at Michigan State University this dilemma was also raised. In teaching students how to interview traumatized individuals instructors in this course have used traumatic material to enhance learning. In a writing by Dufresne (2004), an example was given about a female student who broke down in class as a guest speaker told a story about interviewing a rape victim. Apparently, this young woman had also been raped, and this story triggered her emotionally. In this case, learning was not enhanced. Experiences like the one this student had was confirmed in Horsman's (1999) book that examines the issue of women's ability to learn in the face of traumatic material given the prevalence of trauma in women's lives.

Concerns about the Vicarious Trauma experienced by students when using traumatic material in the classroom was discussed by Cunningham (2004), as well as O'Halloran and O'Halloran (2001). These authors are well-versed in teaching about trauma in their classrooms and understand the necessity for doing so, in particular training students who will be trauma workers. However, these authors are also concerned about the impact of this material on the students and discussed the risks of causing Vicarious Traumatization.

4. Why Use Trauma

It seems to me that with the encounters I have had personally, in relation to student experiences, and the literature, it is becoming clear that using traumatic material is a serious concern. However, when discussing this issue with other instructors and even students it seems necessary in order to prepare students for what they would encounter once out in the field. I know I had not felt prepared for what I would encounter once I entered the human service field and believe this is a valid reason for using this material. Both McCammon (1995) and Cunningham (2004) stated that work preparation is a typical reason for using traumatic material in the classroom.

Informal discussions with several instructors I have had revealed that preparation for the real life work the student will encounter once in the field is highlighted. For example, not only do instructors want students to be prepared for what they will see and deal with, instructors also want students to deal with their own issues before entering the field. Some instructors I have had discussions with think that bringing up the students 'stuff' will force the student to admit and potentially deal with unfinished business or potential boundary issues with clients. One particular instructor told me she did not want students to break down in front of a client and thought it was useful to teach students how to have 'controlled emotional involvement' and this is accomplished through using trauma in the classroom. As well, other instructors think that if students have a certain level of fear about their future encounters, taught through the use of trauma, then students will pay more attention in their efforts and therefore, may be less likely to work without consciousness.

One particular instructor has told me that trauma is used as a tool to increase understanding of the impact of political issues on the day to day lives of those who suffer and believes that without those stories policy would never come alive. Another instructor told me that traumatic stories help to bring life to boring facts and figures. On the surface, I admire these instructors for their desire to bring some potentially difficult and heavy material alive. However, on another level, I can see that limited thought has been given to the impact of trauma on the student that they are ultimately attempting to reach.

Trauma, it seems is also used to teach students to be ethical. When stories are shared by instructors about the cruelty hoisted onto others, and students experience an empathic response, then, according to some instructors, they believe students will remember to be just and fair, less black and white in their dealings with people under some circumstances. In human service work in particular, instructors want to impart the importance of being humane, to understanding there is a story behind what has happened, and they need to hear that story to really be able to help and not jump to

conclusions. In sciences, according to one instructor I spoke with, ethical concerns are becoming more apparent and therefore, students must learn more about the connection between scientific facts and the impact on mankind. The use of traumatic material to do so seems reasonable in these cases, to these instructors.

5. Instructor Responsibility

When I have asked instructors what they do in their classrooms after using traumatic material, I have typically found that some take the time to debrief while others have not really thought about it. Most however, are clear that they want to link the material to the course content but often, in their desire to make sure the learning object, trauma, is linked, a debrief is skipped, particularly if classes are not timed well enough to do both. The expectation then, is that students will approach the instructor, or other supports, if the student is affected by the traumatic material. One particular instructor I spoke with judges the need for debriefing based on her own experience. For example, 'I'm okay, so you are okay.' For others debriefing is more of an intuitive response, based on immediate climate, versus a purposeful act.

I have on occasion asked instructors what affect using trauma in teaching has on the students. There seems to be acknowledgement that these stories often tear at the student's hearts and for some students it may even resonate due to their own trauma experience. However, the belief that trauma as a learning object is most effective, seems to override the negative impact on the student. When I have these discussions with instructors, I often find that very little if any thought has been given to how it impacts the student. In addition, these discussions have shown me that for the most part we care deeply for our student's well being and learning but use trauma as a learning object without much thought. Trauma is sexy and will likely increase discussion and connection to the greater learning to be had, such as empathy or social justice. Typically, when I ask the question about the use of trauma on the students, I notice that these instructors are considering for the first time, that it might actually matter if this approach affects their students.

The sharing of traumatic experiences, if done appropriately, may be effective as a teaching tool and may create meaning for both the instructor and the students. McCammon (1995), O'Halloran and O'Halloran (2001) and Cunningham (2004), discussed the potential impact on students from the use of traumatic material in the classroom and each of these authors suggested particular strategies for minimizing the effect of Vicarious Trauma on the students. For example, O'Halloran and O'Halloran (2001), use Herman's (as cited in O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 2001) trauma recovery program as a framework in the classroom. This framework includes building safety in the classroom, thereby letting go of pain through mourning and reconnection. McCammon (1995), in particular, suggests several strategies for instructors to use in order to mitigate the impact of traumatic material when used in a classroom setting.

6. Instructor Privilege

Clearly these above authors have considered their ethical responsibility in the use of traumatic material in the classroom. As I consider this point, of being ethical in our use of traumatic material, I also consider the responsibility we have as instructors and

professors; I think about our privilege. When I realized many other instructors do not consider the effect traumatic material might have on their students, it occurred to me that college instructors and university professors typically make all the decisions in the classroom. We decide how material is going to be delivered, when it will be delivered and the amount that is delivered. We are in control. This puts us in the place of privilege. From this place, if we are not careful, we can mishandle our power.

When I design class activities, I want to create deep learning. I want the lesson to be meaningful. In placing my energy in the learning object, I may have disconnected from the student as human, and only thought about the learning activity. There is potential for an attitude of separation and lack of responsibility. Jardine (In press), discussed this idea of removing the object from ourselves and seeing it “over there,” therefore, an attitude of separation and lack of responsibility may emerge. He states this “severance has freed us from our kinships and dependencies.” We isolate our decisions and ourselves from the inter and intra personal. This isolation coupled with our privilege may be a dangerous combination, particularly when looking at the potential for students to experience Vicarious Traumatization.

Each individual, both teacher and learner, in an educational space, brings an array of personal experiences and life history. That lived experiences may influence what takes place in the classroom; how one teaches and how one learns. Our lived experience cannot be compartmentalized and put away during class times. Nor does the experience encountered in a classroom necessarily leave us when the class ends. Rather than isolating ourselves, as teachers, through the use of our privilege, perhaps we need to recognize that each individual in the space will experience our learning objects differently and not assume it will have the desired learning outcome.

Gaining perspective into our privilege as teachers and how we engage students in our learning space causes a momentary pause. Since instructors are likely to continue using traumatic materials in the classroom then there is a need to educate instructors on how to use traumatic material so that students can engage without the potential of experiencing Vicarious Traumatization. Recognition that we do own the power in the classroom is paramount and sensitivity should prevail. Awareness about our power and privilege as instructors needs to be raised so that we more consciously choose learning object that not only help the teaching-learning process but also considers the responsibility to students as human beings.

It seems reasonable to use traumatic materials in order to teach ethical responsibility, to help students prepare for the work they will encounter in the field and to create empathy. However, while we are focused on learning we also need to focus on the learner. If we are not careful our well intentioned learning object will not enhance learning at all. If what we do causes a student to experience a variety of traumatic symptoms as seen in a student I discussed earlier, then our efforts are in vain.

It is my hope that this paper has opened a dialogue for instructors to consider the use of traumatic materials as learning objects. While I understand this topic might be of interest mostly to those teaching in human service programs, I believe it does relate to a variety of other post secondary situations. For example, the instructors I have encountered in the sciences who use trauma to teach about human ethics, or English

professors who use trauma to create a felt experience for their students or those in women's studies who drive home the disparity between genders through stories of power imbalance.

I also believe this topic is important as we begin to encounter more individuals in our post secondary institutes who come to us with a trauma history. In these cases the use of traumatic materials may trigger a post-trauma response that could interfere with an individual's learning and therefore, success as a student in higher education. That would be tragic.

Authors' contact Information

Patricia holds a BA in Human and Social Development with an emphasis in Child and Youth Studies, and a MA in Counselling Psychology from the University of Victoria B.C. Canada. She has a special interest in practitioner self-care and wrote her thesis on Vicarious Traumatization. Her other interests are in the area of Family Violence and the effect of trauma on child development. Ms. Kostouros has managed a Youth Shelter, a Women's Shelter and was the Executive Director of a Women's residence dealing with mental health distress and addictions. She has experience with street inclined and entrenched youth and has worked in the Mental Health field with both youth and adults. Pat is a registered psychologist and has a private practice, Beyond Words Counselling and Consulting Inc. and is a board member with the Child and Youth Care Association of Alberta.

Presently, Pat is a full time faculty instructor with Mount Royal College in the Department of Child and Youth Studies. Pat has written material in the area of Mental Health, Student Stress and Self-care and Diversity. As well, Pat has developed both online and hybrid courses for the department of Child and Youth Studies. She also facilitates online courses for the Children's Mental Health Certificate.

For the department of Child and Youth studies Pat has been the lead coordinator for international practica and has developed programs in both Tijuana Mexico and Hamilton New Zealand. These projects are interdisciplinary and include students from all programs in the department of Child and Youth Studies as well as Social Work and Disability Studies.

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