

Teaching Sensitive Topics: Transformative Pedagogy in a Violent Society

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Abstract

This article explores problems and possibilities in teaching courses that raise deep emotional issues for the participants. Two courses were developed to examine violence in South Africa, and provide social and psychological support for victims. It became clear that most of the students were themselves survivors of violence, and that the courses triggered powerful emotional reactions and shifts in self-understanding. This presented a danger that the participants would be overwhelmed by negative emotional responses to the course materials in ways that could be psychologically traumatic and also undermine the potential learning experiences offered by the courses. The challenge was thus to develop a pedagogical model which enhanced the positive potential for emotional engagement with the course materials. Here both the notions of critical pedagogy as personal transformation and empowerment, and the traditional psychotherapeutic ideas emotional containment and working through, were explored to develop a teaching practice that allowed participants to engage with the materials in a deeply personal way while maintaining a supportive environment that fostered increasing intellectual and emotional self-reflexivity.

Keywords: containment, critical pedagogy, psychotherapy, PTSD, trauma, vicarious trauma, violence

Introduction

Nosipho was a 21 year old student in her third year of university

when she explained her current crisis to me. She had been volunteering at a local community centre when an older woman approached her with a problem. This woman's son had gone missing, and she needed help tracing him. The mother had heard rumours that he had been arrested, but local police stations had no record of his arrest. While Nosipho was helping this mother, she was troubled by events at home. Her father, a police officer, was having problems at work. His colleagues had suddenly started visiting the family home late in the evening, and talking to him outside in an obviously furtive and agitated manner. As she tried to assist both her father and the mother of the missing son, things took a turn for the worse. She discovered that her father and his colleagues were implicated in the death of a prisoner in custody, and were attempting to cover it up. Finally she arrived at the ghastly realization that the missing son of the mother she was assisting had in fact been killed in custody by her own father.

Very little in my formal education and training had prepared me for the experience of having Nosipho narrate this personal experience, or for the dozens of other horrifying stories of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, suicides of friends and family, repeated exposure to violence, and experiences of traumatic loss, that students in my violence and trauma courses revealed to me. I could not only understand the feelings of powerlessness and despair that she expressed, but also felt them personally, both in relation to my increasing distress at the pervasive cruelty and suffering that was being exposed, and at my helplessness when attempting to assist my own students. How could I help Nosipho? Offer a sympathetic ear? Refer her to a few sessions at Student Counselling? These seemed woefully inadequate responses to the complexity and horror of this situation. Why had she even approached me? I was simply a lecturer in a technical area of psychology, providing students with theoretical frameworks for understanding the causes of violence and subjective responses to victimisation. I was neither a qualified psychotherapist, nor in a position to provide support services to students. It was not even clear what social or psychological support might be appropriate in this case.

This incident highlights some of the unexpected issues and challenges that emerged in the development of my psychology courses on violence and trauma¹. While the courses had been imagined as straightforward intellectual engagements with these socially significant topics, it became clear that other processes were simultaneously taking place. A wide spectrum of powerful emotional reactions started emerging in response to the courses. These ranged from students describing these courses as the most life-changing experiences of their entire education, to fears of emotional breakdown. An unexpected interaction of emotional and intellectual processes was occurring, and there was no guarantee that the outcomes would always be positive.

This article maps some personal reflections on the problems that arose in the development of those courses, and attempts to formalise a theoretical framework for understanding some of these issues. It explores the development of strategies used to enhance the positive processes taking place in the courses, while simultaneously reducing the risk of negative emotional consequences. It does not offer an overview of the subject of teaching sensitive topics, as this is available elsewhere. Much of the existing literature on teaching sensitive topics concerns the management of classroom discussions on issues such as racism, and focuses on ways of ensuring a respectful engagement with the experiences of others. At issue in these situations are questions of prejudice and the marginalisation of certain experiences. The primary risk is that those discussions could re-enact the hurtfulness of the prevailing social inequalities. Another important stream in this literature deals with socially restricted topics, and taboo issues such as how to teach safer sex practices in the context of cultural norms against the open discussion of sexuality (Lesko, Brotman, Agarwal & Quakenbush 2010;

¹ These included the third level 16 credit undergraduate course PSYC350 Understanding Violence (originally PSYC212 Psychology and Society), the Honours level 16 credit courses PSYC731 Trauma in Context (formerly PSYC317 Trauma in Context) and PSYC732 Victim Empowerment and Trauma Support, all offered in the Psychology major and Honours programmes. These courses consisted of racially diverse groups of students, somewhat skewed towards middle-class backgrounds, predominantly female, and mostly between the ages of 19 and 22.

Masinga 2009; Van Laren, Mitchell, Mudaly, Pithouse-Morgan & Singh 2013). Both those concerns did at times emerge in these courses, but they were not the primary focus. At issue, rather, was the ways in which certain ideas and theoretical frameworks could produce emotional reactions by shifting students' self-understandings and perceptions of the world, and the complexity of the lecturer's role in these situations.

Critical Pedagogy and the Transformative Power of Learning

Critical pedagogy has always stressed the transformative power of learning, but has focussed on the empowering aspects of increasing understanding of the social world, often specifically exposing systems of power and injustice in order to allow students to challenge and change them. This framework informed the creation of these courses: they were designed to offer students ways of understanding important aspects of their personal experiences and social environment, including the injustices, abuses and suffering inflicted on them by their social environment. Specifically, the courses explored the problems of violence in South Africa, including the nature and causes of violence, its psychological effects, and the interventions that might assist survivors and reduce violence throughout society. The aim was not simply to present key theories and research findings in these academic areas, but to provide the students with a coherent framework for understanding and dealing with these problems in contemporary South Africa.

The enthusiasm and challenges that soon emerged were linked to the same issue: violence and victimisation are not simply abstract social puzzles to be solved, but issues that deeply affect the lives of students and their loved ones. The threat of being attacked is a source of significant anxiety for most South Africans (CSV 2007), and the experience of being threatened, abused or assaulted produces powerful negative emotional effects. The diagnostic category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was specifically developed to clarify the chronic debilitating psychological effects of experiencing terrifying threats of harm. It details the patterns of persistent anxiety and despair that can follow such events, identifying specific features such as extreme irritability, sudden rage, nightmares, flashbacks, social and emotional withdrawal, intense anxiety caused by any reminders of the event, and attempts to numb these painful emotions and

block out the painful memories (DSM-IV-TR 2000; Herman 1997; Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela 2008).

It is well known that South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world (Altbeker 2007; CSV 2007), and these courses were developed in direct response to the urgent need to produce experts who could address this social issue. At the same time, South Africa's high prevalence of violence also increased the proportion of students who had been directly affected by traumatic victimisation in comparison to most comparable institutions in the rest of the world (Kaminer & Eagle 2010). These very high levels of violence not only affect those who have personally experienced attacks, but also those who live in fear of being victimised. This is aggravated by the ways in which the media sensationalises the worst violent crimes and produces a distorted sense of risk. The concept of insidious trauma (Brown 1995) explains how members of vulnerable groups can experience chronic anticipatory fear and helplessness which is in itself traumatic, even in the absence of any personal experience of assault. Younger people are, furthermore, at higher risk of being victimized (CSV 2007), less able to protect themselves, and more vulnerable to emotional harm (Herman 1997). Thus the students in these courses are at a substantially higher risk of having already experienced, or being at immediate risk of, traumatic violence than both people in most other countries, and South Africans of other age groups.

All of these factors contribute to an ambivalent context for the courses. On the one hand, students have a deeply felt need to understand and gain practical and intellectual mastery of these problems that cause them anxiety and distress, and often feel enormous relief when learning to deal with these issues more effectively. The courses give them the ability to understand their own experiences, protect themselves, intervene in these social problems, and provide assistance to others.

On the other hand, confronting these problems is inherently risky in several ways. Firstly, becoming intellectually immersed in the range and severity of prevailing forms of violence can be emotionally overwhelming, and may leave students feeling even more vulnerable and pessimistic. Spending hours each day studying horrifying actions and hurtful experiences could create an exaggerated sense of how dangerous their social environment is, and how vulnerable they are within it. Rather than feeling empowered and

skilled by their new understandings, they could feel even more anxious and overwhelmed by the scale and horror of the challenges that need to be faced (Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela 2008).

Secondly, for the students who have already faced traumatic violence, the course materials could trigger painful memories and overwhelming emotions that they had otherwise managed to keep out of their conscious awareness. It is well known that an important aspect of post-traumatic syndromes is a heightened sensitivity to reminders of the traumatic event, a related tendency to avoid such reminders, and a risk of being overwhelmed by the traumatic recollections when these triggers do occur (Herman 1997; Sanderson 2010). Thus for students who had experienced personal assaults, or any of the other forms of victimisation explored in the course, exploring these topics could leave them flooded with anxiety and other residual emotions from their original traumatic events (Schauben & Frazier 1995).

Conscious and Unconscious Memories of Trauma Triggered by Course Content

There are significant variations in how the course contents contributed to the process of unfolding memories. The first is where the person is aware of the traumatic events behind their own reactions, and consciously tries to avoid reminders because they know how invasive and distressing their emotional recollections can be. The second, less common but considerably riskier, situation is where there is no conscious memory of the original trauma, and the course materials trigger a sudden, unexpected flood of memories and emotions. This reaction is typically more overwhelming for several reasons. The reaction is terrifying because it is unexpected, because the original experience was repressed or dissociated precisely because it was so overwhelming, and because the feelings and memories have not yet begun to be assimilated into conscious awareness where they then can be integrated and mastered (Herman 1997). This kind of reaction is often associated with early trauma which occurs at vulnerable stages of psychological development, and is thus typically associated with severe forms of child abuse (Kaminer & Eagle 2010; Terr 1995).

These reactions can be further differentiated in terms of the clarity of memories of the events. The memories can either be extremely vivid, often with a strong and specific sensory quality such as an unusually lucid visual image, sound, smell or tactile sensation. Alternatively they can be strong but confusing feelings whose origin cannot be clearly identified (Herman 1997, Sanderson 2010). For instance, when Mary was studying a section on domestic violence, she had the extremely vivid memory of the precise sound of her mother's finger breaking as her father twisted her mom's hand. She had a conscious recollection of the escalating abuse that had taken place in her home, yet this single sound coalesced all the years of violence into an emotional moment where the full horror of what was taking place became overwhelming. She was able to express and integrate the pent up fear and grief associated with this trauma, and as she increasingly developed an intellectual grasp of the causes and effects of domestic violence, and had the opportunity to explore it with others who had been through similar experiences, she increasingly moved from the emotional position of scared child to a confident and skilled professional who could assist others facing similar problems.

In another example, when Krishnee was studying child sexual abuse she started having vague but persistent feelings of anxiety, sometimes escalating into mild panic attacks and at one point burst into tears while reading the course materials. She increasingly became troubled by the idea that she might have had such an experience herself, and yet no specific memories or evidence suggested that this could have occurred. She wondered whether she might have repressed the memories of a traumatic event, or if her emotions were just empathic responses to the disturbing experiences of vulnerability and hurt that were being explored in the course. The difficulty in arriving at a clear conclusion was in itself distressing, and left her feeling anxious and uncertain. She searched the academic literature for a decisive answer, only to discover that the professionals disagreed amongst themselves about situations such as this, and that there were several competing explanations for her reactions (Hacking 1995).

Agatha, reading the same materials, had a completely different reaction. While going over a particular case study she was suddenly attacked by vivid and intense memories of childhood sexual abuse that she had not been conscious of up until that point. She could remember the specific items

in the room around her at the time, and relived fragmented aspects of the experience and her emotional reactions in precise detail. The memory was shocking and overwhelming, and she felt that it would be impossible to continue immersing herself in the course materials given her sudden emotional fragility. We discussed the situation confidentially and agreed that it was advisable to discontinue the course, but absolutely essential for her to be in personal psychotherapy until she could come to terms with her traumatic experience. The following year she returned to the course, despite having several other modules available. Later Agatha became a qualified psychotherapist herself, and described her original reactions to the course materials as a turning point in her life, where psychology shifted from being a purely academic interest to a journey of self-discovery. Because she had received appropriate support, the crisis triggered a process that clarified many of her previously troubling but incomprehensible reactions to people and situations, and gave her a new framework of lived meaning in her personal and professional life.

While Mary and Agatha developed from crisis to empowerment, there is no guarantee that all possible reactions will end well. Krishnee was left without any immediate closure, and more worryingly, Agatha's experience raises the question of what would have happened if she had not shared her difficulties and sought help. If Agatha had become socially and emotionally withdrawn, and descended into a spiral of hopelessness, she might even have completely abandoned her studies, and never come to terms with her traumatic experience. This is certainly not an acceptable outcome, and raises serious questions about the ethics of exposing students to the risks of potentially hurtful material. One reaction to this danger is simply to argue that no risk is acceptable, and unless there is complete certainty that all possible negative outcomes can be avoided, courses like this should simply not be offered at all.

This reaction is inadequate for several reasons. Even courses with completely neutral emotional content create risks. Every year some students in all disciplines are crippled by performance anxiety and self-doubt, or fall into depression and despair when their results do not match the standards that they have set for themselves. This is not evidence that education should be abolished, but that the risks should be carefully examined, effectively managed, and thoughtfully weighed against the possible benefits. In cases

where the materials may precipitate negative emotional reactions, these considerations are even more important, and the precise nature of the risks and benefits, and feasible means of managing them, warrants further analysis.

The Benefits of the Trauma and Violence Courses

Firstly, they train students to deal with some of the most pressing social problems that exist in South African society, and thus have enormous social value. Secondly, most students report that they offer an extremely important learning experience, not just in acquiring vital knowledge and skills, but in the personal transformation and empowerment they offer. Across the course evaluations, nearly all students were happy that they had taken the courses and would recommend them to other students (91%), reported that the courses had positively contributed to their study of psychology (94%) and believed that the courses had allowed them to challenge their own beliefs and assumptions, and develop deeper self-insight (97%) They described the modules as 'relevant to our everyday lives', 'very insightful' and 'the most interesting and applicable course I have ever done'. Students reported that the courses 'helped [them] to understand and make sense of both our lives and the lives of others', 'showed new realities and ways to think' and provided the opportunity to 'think critically about issues usually taken for granted'. They specifically reported on the transformative impact of the modules that 'helped on a personal level', 'had the biggest impact individually and academically', 'made me more aware', and had 'positive impact' that would 'help me take on the world' (Author 2012). Thirdly, many of the students will face the risky emotional triggers covered in the courses in later life. If they have not been prepared to deal with these issues in a symbolic and intellectual form within the structured and supported context of university courses, they are likely to face more stressful and demanding practical contexts later in life (Sommer 2008).

This is especially true of the students who continue to become professional psychotherapists. The distressing incidents and reactions that are explored in the courses are of the same kind that they will encounter in their daily work, except that in that latter situation the wellbeing of highly vulnerable clients will depend on these future professionals being able to

cope with, and respond appropriately to these crises. At that point they will have the added stress and ethical responsibility of simultaneously dealing with their own reactions and those of their clients. It is precisely because of inadequate training for these situations that professional psychology has one of the highest burnout rates of any profession in the world (Maslach Schaufeli & Leiter 2001). If the courses assist in preparing students for these future responsibilities they are certainly of enormous value, even if they produce a significant transient distress in certain cases, or alert some students to the fact that they are not in fact emotionally ready for those responsibilities. The question is less whether the courses might precipitate this distress, than whether it leads to a destructive downward spiral or initiates a process of increasing self-insight and positive transformation (Schaben & Frazier 1995; Sexton 1999).

Given the significant benefits, the real question is then how to reduce the risks and enhance the positive outcomes. Many of the proposals developed here are based on insights from psychotherapeutic models of emotional support. While useful, these models were typically developed for one-on-one encounters where the therapist offers very close and personally tailored support for each client, whereas the courses necessarily entail the simultaneous management of large numbers of students with extremely diverse experiences and reactions. It is precisely the sizes of the groups and diversity of the responses that proves challenging, as it becomes difficult to carefully monitor each individual's experience and offer different support for each particular need. This is aggravated by the external pressures on universities to increase student numbers while cutting budgets for support services. The trauma and violence courses have been faced with dramatic increases in class sizes, while the funding for qualified tutors to provide close attention and support for small groups has disappeared. Nevertheless, some simple administrative strategies have nevertheless remained viable. One tactic is to offer the modules at more advanced levels, where the students are more mature and also more likely to proceed to a career which requires the skills offered. Another important consideration is that the courses should be electives rather than compulsory core courses. The ethical principle of informed consent requires that students be fully briefed of any risks from the outset, and have the option of choosing not to participate, or withdrawing if the need arises.

A clearer conceptual articulation is necessary to understand exactly how the courses precipitate negative emotional reactions. Within the trauma studies, the problem of trigger stimuli is well known. This can be any idea, image or sensation that elicits a flood of negative emotion (Herman 1997; Wilson 2006). It is typically some specific reminder of a prior traumatic experience. Thus a student who has grown up with domestic violence might feel extremely distressed when studying this problem, as it recalls painful memories and evokes unresolved emotions. These trigger reactions primarily affect individuals who have previously had a similar experience, but have never had the opportunity to work through and integrate their distressing emotional responses. One advantage of this situation is that the trauma survivor will typically already be aware of their own triggers and have strategies for avoiding or managing them. This is why it is essential to brief students in advance of the issues covered in the courses, and to alert them to the possible triggers. As indicated earlier in the example of Agatha, however, this is more difficult when the person previously had no conscious memory of the trauma, and suddenly finds themselves overwhelmed by totally unexpected reactions.

These emotional triggers can be understood within the broad psychological concept of transference. Within psychotherapy, transference refers to the way in which a client's emotional predisposition and prior experiences shape how they experience the therapy. In the narrowest sense, it is taken to refer the ways in which the relationship with the therapist replays the client's earliest and most significant developmental relationships. Understanding the processes emerging in the relationship with the therapist thus becomes a way of developing insight into the client's formative emotional experiences. In the broadest sense, transference can refer to the way in which reactions of any current situation can be shaped by the personal meanings and feelings which the person brings to that experience as a result their personal background (Dalenberg 2000; Doukessa & Mitchell 2003). This highlights the need to pay attention to the specific reactions that individual students may have to the course materials. Ideas that are simply intellectually interesting to most students may be overwhelmingly distressing for specific individuals for whom those ideas invoke a personal traumatic meaning. Further than this, students may transfer emotions and emotional needs onto the course or the person of the lecturer. They may express the rage they were

never previously allowed to articulate towards a perpetrator, or feel a desperate need to be nurtured and protected in a way that was not provided during some previous time of distress (Herman 1997; Wilson 2006).

For the lecturer who imagines that their only role is to offer intellectual guidance, the sudden emergence of these emotions can be confusing, disruptive and distressing. While the institutional structure of the lecturer-student relationship places restraints on the expression of aggression and hostility, it actively encourages idealisation, allowing the lecturer to be imagined as an all-knowing authority figure and all-powerful caregiver. In reality the lecturer can provide little more than intellectual guidance and referral to expert care where it is required. Being the object of this idealising fantasy can be gratifying and seductive, allowing the lecturer to feel valued and appreciated. At the same time it can be highly stressful, creating a desire to help students in distress, only to foreground that inadequacy of the lecturer's skills and the limitations of the institutional framework in meeting the students' emotional needs.

Another cluster of processes that are well known in psychology are the issues of burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation. These refer to reactions in dealing with emotionally demanding material, even in cases where it has no particular traumatic significance for the individual (Lerias & Byrne 2003). Burnout is often used as a generic term for the negative outcomes of any highly demanding and stressful situation (Maslach Schaufeli & Leiter 2001), and here it is relevant to situations where the pressures of academic performance are made unmanageable by the addition of another layer of emotional demands. Where students are already feeling chronically stressed by the intellectual requirements of university, having to simultaneously deal with emotionally complex and demanding issues in their academic work can be the final straw that pushes them to a point of exhaustion.

Compassion fatigue (Figley 2002) occurs mainly amongst caregivers whose work entails systematic exposure to the suffering of others. They are at risk of empathically sharing this distress to a point where it becomes overwhelming. It not only undermines their personal wellbeing but also impairs their ability to continue to identify with, and care for, those in distress. Vicarious trauma extends this concept to highlight the ways in which those who work closely with survivors of traumatic experiences can

themselves come to experience a kind of traumatisation. In other words, the distressing events and emotions experienced by the clients increasingly affects the caregivers to the point where they also begin to experience anxiety attacks, helplessness, despair, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional and social withdrawal, and the other features associated with primary traumatic stress (Dalenburg 2000; Sanderson 2010; Sommer 2008).

While the violence and trauma courses do not entail students directly providing formal care for distressed individuals, they do focus on accounts of victimisation and distress. In the same way that a therapist listens to the disclosures of a client, students read case studies and imaginatively empathise with the experiences that are explained. Ironically, the therapist may be in a less psychologically vulnerable position, because they can at least intervene and provide assistance. They can identify with the clients vulnerability, but master it by being part of the solution. The empathic student feels the negative emotions but remains powerless, both because they do not yet have the skills to solve these problems, and because there is no client present to help. One of the primary emotional rewards of crisis support work, namely being able to actually help people in distress, is denied.

Traumatic Experiences and Intellectual Development

While these notions of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma explain the emotional contagion that affects people working in this field of violence and trauma, another equally important but less clearly theorised aspect of this work is the intellectual changes that they produce. Janoff-Bulman (1995) offers a framework for understanding the cognitive effects of traumatic experiences. She shows how they can shatter several underlying cognitive assumptions: that people are reliable and benign, that the world is reasonably safe, and that we are able to protect ourselves. The loss of these assumptions leaves people feeling isolated, vulnerable and anxious. In this model the initial terrifying experience produces changes in meaning that in turn produces lingering negative emotional effects.

The violence and trauma courses raise the question of how this relationship between ideas and emotions can also work in the other direction. An intellectual exploration of the many shocking forms of brutality that people are capable of, the pervasive patterns of victimisation that exist in our

society, and the harmful effects of these on individuals, can draw students into a more negative understanding of their social world. This can undermine their underlying assumptions of the trustworthiness of others and their own taken-for-granted sense of relative safety. These changes can in turn produce feelings of helplessness, anxiety and despair. The formal theoretical analysis of social and psychological processes offered in the courses can thus precipitate changes in personal meaning and shifts in subjective emotional state. This is precisely what had not been anticipated in the initial development of the courses. I had imagined the courses purely as exercises in intellectual development which, if they had any personal emotional impact at all, would be experienced as personally empowering because of the increasing understanding they offered.

Psychotherapeutic models² not only help us to understand some of the possible negative impacts of these academic courses, they also suggest guidelines for enhancing safety, offering support, and facilitating positive transformation. They show how, in the face of overwhelming negative experiences, emotional defence mechanisms are initially protective but later become dysfunctional, either by breaking down in times of crisis or producing ongoing destructive reactions. Thus a person who has been assaulted may avoid all recollection of the upsetting event, only to find themselves having seemingly unrelated nightmares and panic attacks, or suddenly exploding into rage during minor interpersonal conflicts. Or they might protect themselves by becoming socially withdrawn, only to lose the pleasures and support that come from close relationships (Herman 1997; William & Clemens 2012). Here the psychotherapeutic process seeks to offer a safe and supportive environment where, rather than being avoided, these distressing emotions can be safely expressed, understood and integrated into everyday awareness. Through this process these emotions lose their ability to disrupt and overwhelm the individual, thus allowing for the emergence of greater autonomy and wellbeing.

² This article cannot even begin to sketch the extremely diverse range of highly developed psychotherapeutic models that exist within the field of psychology. Instead it offers no more than a grossly oversimplified caricature of a loosely psychodynamic model which is nevertheless useful in terms of articulating an explanatory framework for this specific context.

A Therapeutic Pedagogy?

Could any aspects of the processes of autonomy and wellbeing be introduced into the teaching environment? One important guideline is that while the therapeutic client should be encouraged to explore difficult material, this process must unfold at a pace appropriate to the individual, rather than being forced on them in an intrusive and threatening manner. While it is possible to carefully construct academic courses so that they move from less to gradually more emotionally challenging material, this cannot easily be tailored to individual needs given that students can experience widely differing personal responses to the same issues. General theoretical discussions can be offered before moving to more specific issues, but there is no predicting whether a particular student will be more distressed by a discussion of hijacking rather than a case study of child abuse (Sanderson 2010).

An important feature of most trauma therapies is the process of psycho-education. This entails explaining the typical reactions to an experience, so that that client can discover that their own reactions are both normal and comprehensible. While the survivor of a traumatic experience may experience their reactions as even more distressing because they seem crazy and incoherent, psycho-education assures the client that their reactions are not only understandable but in fact already understood by others. This is easy enough to introduce into studies of distressing materials, and is in fact an essential part of any course in trauma studies. In the case of the Understanding Violence course, students were introduced to the typical ways in which people react to reports of violence, ranging from deliberate avoidance of the topic to feeling shocked, overwhelmed, afraid, and vulnerable. This gave them a framework for monitoring their own reactions, and for realising that these were normal, predictable and coherent responses that were already well understood, and thus need not be experienced as chaotic or terrifying.

Related to this is the therapeutic process of learning to recognise one's own reactions and develop increasing self-insight (Herman 1997; Sanderson 2010). In the courses, this meant moving away from an exclusive focus on teaching the prescribed materials and substantially reorienting the classes towards participatory discussion. Students were increasingly offered opportunities to identify and explain their own emotional reactions to the

course materials, rather than just articulating their intellectual grasp of the material. An initial difficulty in this process is that it posed a fundamentally new type of question that was bewildering to many students. Not only was the idea of talking about personal feelings in the social and intellectual context of an academic lecture totally unexpected, but it became clear than many students had never had the opportunity to engage in this type of self-reflection at all. Despite the familiarity of Oprah-style talk show disclosure, many individuals not only felt restricted by significant taboos against this type of personal discussion, but had in fact never been in a situation that allowed or encouraged emotional introspection at all.

Seeing the lecturer talk about his own reactions, and having more outspoken classmates begin to articulate their experiences, both gave permission and provided a model for this kind of self-exploration (Dalenberg 2000). The classes quickly produced a social culture in which these questions were normal and familiar, not only enabling students to understanding their reactions to the specific course materials, but to increasingly develop the skill of emotional self-insight and the confidence to express this to others. This is itself a highly significant skill to facilitate in any person, but even more valuable to those progressing toward a career in Psychology. The modules were thus restructured to make discussion of personal reactions to emotionally challenging materials a core aspect of every lecture.

I began to open every lecture by asking the class what feelings the current readings had evoked in them. This precipitated a process that remained remarkably regular across different classes. Initially the students' responses always described the intellectual content of the work. As I repeatedly pointed out that these were all answers to a different question, the classes went into a significant phase of bewilderment. Then suddenly a flood of responses and enthusiastic debate erupted as the students re-oriented themselves to this new type of question which solicited a kind of engagement entirely different to their previous academic experiences. From that point, encouraging participation and reflection was not a problem. Rather the issue actually shifted to one of managing the vigorous and often unbounded debates.

Here the psychotherapeutic model is again useful through the concept of containment (Sanderson 2010; Wilson 2006). In therapy, the aim is not simply to allow the client to express their emotions, but to do this in an

environment which allows the feeling of those emotions to be unthreatening. It is precisely because the emotion that was previously overwhelming can now be expressed in a situation where it can be accepted and understood by another person who neither withdraws in fear nor retaliates in anger that the emotion loses its disruptive power and can thus be tolerated and integrated into the self. In exactly the same way, the student's disclosures needed to be met with understanding and acceptance rather than rejecting reactions that silence and isolate them. The real risk is that the lecturer or other students' prejudices, moralism and emotional anxiety will trigger exactly such a negative response, and that this will have a deeply damaging effect both on the individual student as well as on the class dynamic of trust and mutual support.

One significant concern is that students can express sentiments that are hurtful to their classmates. A special problem exists in areas of prejudice, where one student feels that their viewpoint is reasonable, when it in fact is violent to someone else. Interestingly, this almost never happened around issues of race, because of a consensus that racism was undesirable, but was common in discussions of gender and sexual orientation, as both sexism and homophobia were frequently seen as normal and socially acceptable. In these situations it was possible to critically analyse the social origin and psychological function of these destructive ideas, while paying close attention to their harmful effects. A useful technique was to immediately ask 'does anyone feel hurt by that statement?', and allow the victims to participate in challenging the destructive ideas. This question both gave them increasing confidence to protect themselves and helped the class to negotiate a critical social consensus that challenged prevailing prejudices.

Unlike most of the examples in the existing literature, these courses focussed on victimisation rather than prejudice, and thus raised a very specific problem. One common way in which people deal with their own emotional vulnerability is not only to deny it in themselves, but to attack it in others. This is unfortunately not only a common technique used by parents to suppress distressing emotions in their children, but at the core of much school bullying. Students who have been socialised into this emotional defence may feel tempted to humiliate classmates who share their own sensitive emotions. It is essential to manage these attacks by avoiding engaging in a counter-attack to punish this behaviour, and instead to both

show why that behaviour is harmful and thus unacceptable in this social context, and also explain that it too is an emotional defence. By articulating and supporting the emotional anxiety underneath the aggression, both the perpetrator and victim can feel understood, and there is no need to for the conflict to escalate. Instead, this analysis facilitates a process by which both the perpetrator and the victim can recognise the common vulnerability underneath both the aggression and the victimisation respectively.

Interestingly, one of the very important group dynamics that emerged was mutual support and protection. A bond between vulnerable students was quickly established, and they began to support each other whenever any of them were subject to hostility. For instance, once gender-based violence had been de-normalised through a critical analysis, the women in the class formed a strong informal support network that then challenged any further articulations of sexism. This is highly significant, not only because it protected those in the class, but because forming this kind of critical social network is exactly what has to occur if the normalised forms of violence in society are to be challenged and dismantled. By watching the lecturer simultaneously provide emotional containment for the disclosures of vulnerability, and offer an intellectual framework for challenging the dominant forms of victimisation, they quickly became empowered to do those things for themselves, and for each other. This is exactly the kind of transformative pedagogy that the courses had aspired to.

Reconciling Irreconcilable Traumas

As with all things, the practice is more complex than the theory. In one class on violence a young white woman tearfully shared how her brother had been shot dead by hijackers. She concluded her moving account with the question ‘how can I ever trust a Black person again?’ While this might be read as a serious critical attempt to challenge the way in which her personal trauma and racialising cultural background had become intertwined, it was also clear that for her predominantly Black classmates, this was a scandalous reiteration of the all too familiar and offensive racist categorisation of all Black South Africans as potentially violent criminals. The immediate challenge was to allow the social space of the class to contain and respect two seeming incompatible traumas: her inconsolable grief, and the profound

hurt that her final question caused to many of her peers³.

In this situation, it was possible to acknowledge her loss while providing a theoretical critique of the way in which states of vulnerability often trigger ostensibly protective, but socially dysfunctional, generalisations about the external world. It was also possible to frame the hurt she had naively caused her classmates in terms of the ongoing structural violence of inequality and prejudice, and their anger in terms of the persistent patterns of exclusion and denigration which affected their lives. Even in her grief, this student immediately understood and openly regretted the harm her statement caused, while her classmates embraced her grief, clearly articulating how deeply they shared her experiences of victimisation and loss in their own lives. The moment of social polarization was thus transformed into a new social solidarity around the shared experience of vulnerability by critically dismantling the antagonistic defences that the students' respective traumas had mobilised, and identifying and expressing the underlying negative emotions.

One group of students took this even further, relating a recent event in which they had been walking in a part of town notorious for drug dealing and crime. They had witnessed a crime in which the only three Whites on the street had mugged a passing Black businessman, a scene which so profoundly inverted the prevailing racist discourses that all the bystanders simply burst out laughing. While the class joined into the ostensible hilarity of this incident, it was possible to show beneath the generous embrace of this story was a real collective anxiety about both racism and criminal victimisation, and that the humour was a way of simultaneously expressing and defusing these fears. This incident showed not only how effective a little bit of critical analysis can be in defusing social and psychological tensions, but how willing the students were to actively participate in collectively caring for each other, even in the face of fear and hurt.

³ Another essential dynamic was my own anxiety about being a White South African in this situation. This includes both the treacherous minefield of being a White person claiming authority in matters of race, and perhaps my own unconscious desire to prematurely steer this encounter towards reconciliation rather than allowing the full depth of the conflict to unfold autonomously.

This, and so many similar incidents, have repeatedly demonstrated how teaching sensitive topics provides unique opportunities: to develop new methods of pedagogical engagement, to challenge social taboos and injustices, and to facilitate personal and social transformation. While it requires particularly thoughtful attention to all the things that could go wrong, it deserves an equally clear appreciation of the things that can, and do, go right.

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