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Teaching Gendered Violence: The impact upon students' thoughts (and attitudes)

Prof. C Donovan, Dr. N Ballantyne, and M. Durey

The Background Context

Current institutional processes do not focus on gathering data from students about their thoughts and attitudes towards the subject-specific knowledge generated in the module content. Ordinarily, we rely on the modes of assessments within the module to gauge the extent students acquire knowledge and develop skills pertinent to the topics within the module. However, there is very little opportunity here for students' own thoughts and/or attitudes to be articulated about the content of the module; and certainly not without recourse to the academic literature and research. In January 2014, we began delivering SSC 317 Violence, Gender and Society for the first time as a level 6, final year module. During this module, students are taught about how the concepts of gender, sexuality and love are related to gendered violence. Gendered violence is real for our students. The Crime Surveys for England and Wales tells us that the age group at the highest risk of experiencing or perpetrating interpersonal and intimate partner violence are those aged between 16-24 years: which includes the majority of our students. Given the extent, nature and serious impact of such violence, it has been identified as a major social problem in contemporary society: this is illustrated by the Coalition Government's *Violence Against Women and Girls: Action Plan*.

We are keenly aware that the research and evidence being presented in SSC 317 provides knowledge that can be extremely challenging for students who might, for example, have personal experience of violence or find the implications of the research presented challenging to their world views. Previous research has documented the difficulties in teaching gendered violence. Moylan (2003) documented how defensive her students were to accepting feminist analysis and perspectives when teaching about peace. Likewise, Good and Moss-Racusin (2010:418) found barriers to student engagement include: general failure of students to engage with gender themes, 'anti-feminist backlash' and 'invisibility of male privilege'. When Sheffield (1990) teaches students about sexual violence she focuses students on the personal consequences of such violence. In doing so, they learn how their own attitudes are linked to the perpetuation of sexual violence, which in turn helps them understand how such violence is a systemic, institutional, structural and societal problem, rather than an individual problem for the perpetrator. Other research has similarly documented that teaching about sexual violence (Kennedy et al., 2013) and intimate partner violence (Sprague et al., 2013) serves to dispel such myths and misconceptions of these violences in practitioners in training.

For these reasons, there is a need for us, as tutors in higher education and researchers within the field of violence and abuse to understand how our teaching impacts upon students' thinking for two key reasons. These two key reasons are our research questions.

Firstly, is the content of the module and our teaching of this impacting upon students' thinking (including attitudes) in ways in which we as tutors and researchers in the field consider appropriate.

Secondly, what are the implications of this impact upon students' thinking as a result of the module.

Methods of Research

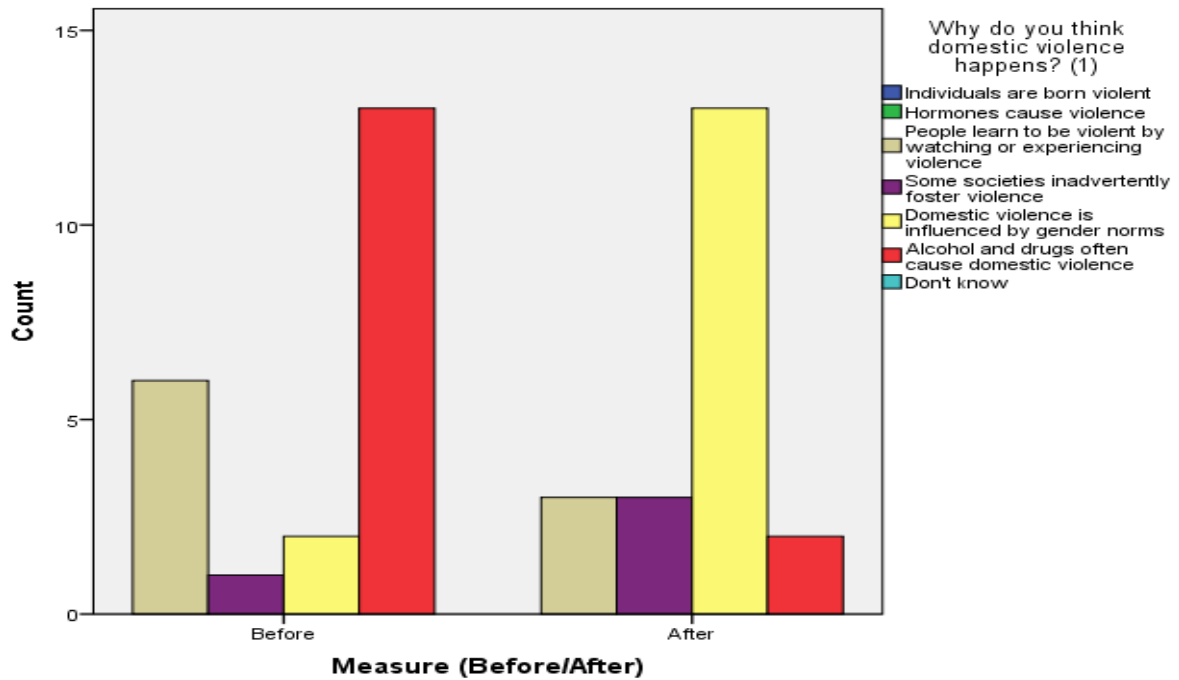
To gauge impact upon students' thoughts and attitudes, pre (n=24, i.e., 20 female and 4 male students) and post module (n=21, i.e., 20 female and 1 male student) questionnaires were completed by students to assess knowledge and awareness of key issues in interpersonal violence. The questionnaires were analysed using SPSS. Seven students also took-part in a focus group at the end of the module so we could explore the responses found in the analysis of the questionnaires in more qualitative detail.

Key Findings

The first part of the questionnaire (which was completed both before and after the module) contained 11 questions assessing knowledge and awareness of key issues in interpersonal violence. Students' answers to these questions were scored, and the average scores for before and after the module were compared using One-Way ANOVA (although not technically the correct test to use, this was the only test for statistical significance that could be used with this data). The scores altered pre-module from 7.75 to post-module to 9.15 ($p=0.000$). There was also a noticeable decrease in the number of 'Don't Know' answers given on questions (from 1.63 before to 0.10 after the module, $p=0.000$). These are strongly indicative of active engagement with the issues and a move towards more accurate and socially-aware thinking regarding domestic violence.

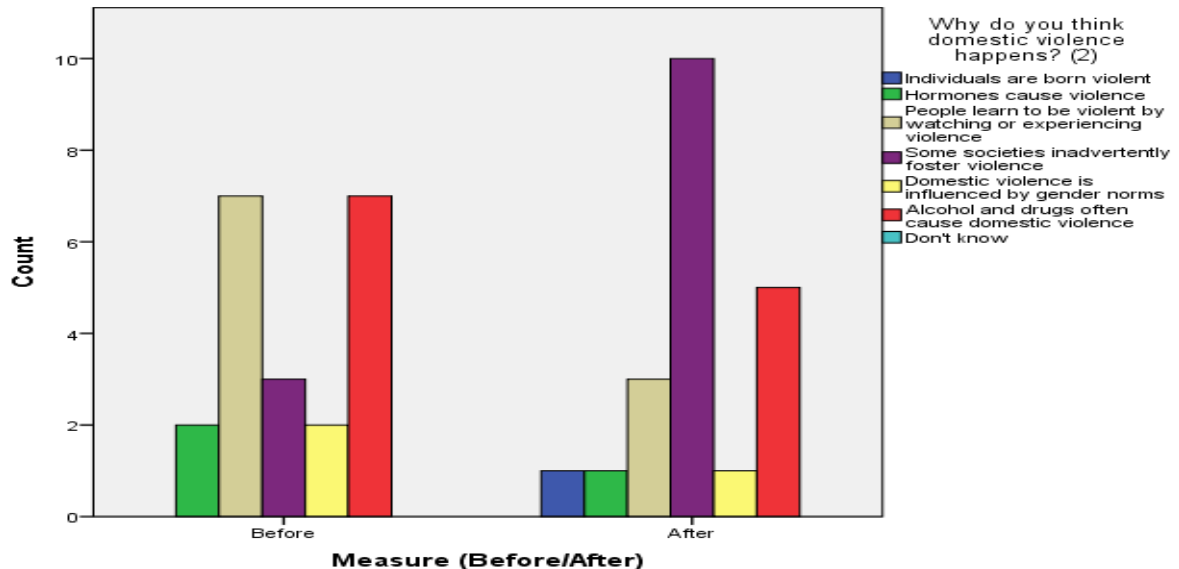
The remaining questions in the first part of the questionnaire allowed for an interpretation of the causes of domestic violence. The pre-module questionnaires highlighted noticeable individualist tendencies within students' answers (which reflect the tendency within the general population). The most common first and second choice answers to 'Why do you think domestic violence happens?' in the pre-module questionnaire were 'Alcohol and drugs often cause domestic violence', and 'People learn to be violent by watching or experiencing violence'. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Why do you think domestic violence happens (1st choice)



In the post-module questionnaire, although both of these answers still featured, the tendency had shifted to more socially-aware answers. The most common answers given were ‘Domestic violence is influenced by gender norms’, and ‘Some societies inadvertently foster violence.’ (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Why do you think domestic violence happens? (2nd choice)



The second part of the questionnaire, which was only administered after the module, asked questions about the impact the module had made on students’ thoughts for possible study or career. The importance of learning which is stimulating and causes students to re-

evaluate their future life-choices is an important part of the university experience insofar as it produces graduates ready to actively engage with employment.

A higher proportion of students (66.67% vs. 47.62%) agreed that they would like to work in an organisation which deals with violence in some way than continue to study issues around interpersonal violence.

From an employability point of view, it can be argued that modules which generate an interest to actively engage with the world (as opposed to the arguably more reflective approach involved in further study) produce graduates ready to apply their knowledge to employment.

The focus group highlighted several important issues relating to students' perceptions of the module and the impact it has made on their views regarding personal relationships. An increased awareness of the social nature of problems around interpersonal violence and a critical evaluation of policy and government agencies/legal institutions was apparent. As Mary (all names have been changed) said:

It's not a private problem anymore; it's like a social problem.

Students implied that the module had made them question what makes successful relationships, and reflexively considered their previous and on-going behaviour. As Robert shares:

What I found particularly interesting was the fact that I didn't even realise that sometimes I was actually doing it myself but learning from this I understand that sometimes my behaviour is coercive without me even knowing it and I just do it anyway.

There were also several instances where the nature of love and the idea of relationships and what was to be expected from them was questioned. As Anne explains:

I worked in, it was like a child care centre a couple of year ago, and I had little kids 6, 7 year old [who already] knew the name of their kids. When I have kids I'm going to have 2 girls and a boy, I'm going to have a dog, I'm going to have a husband and the kids are going to be called this, this and this from like 5 or 6 year old. That is horrendous. I think that's what's expected of them.

There was also evidence of the application of (relatively broad) theoretical issues to an understanding of their own behaviour, and a critical awareness of power-relations and the historical development of contemporary ideals regarding love and relationships. Anne says:

To be fair though there's quite a bad outlook on feminists in general as being men-haters that wear their bras on their head. It's not actually what it's about.

Students also suggested that their future behaviour regarding witnessing domestic abuse has been influenced by the module – particularly understanding the issues which can prevent victims of domestic abuse from seeking help themselves. Sometimes these issues formed part of a student’s future career plans. Robert explains:

Well that’s what it is. I want to change the opinions of people. I wouldn’t want to be in the police and have people of the community hate me. I don’t want to have that relationship because how else are you supposed to tackle crime if you haven’t got the community on your side to help?

Emily also says:

Yeah. I think for me personally, with this whole coercive thing, if I saw someone in the street that I thought was going on between a couple it would be my business to maybe report it or something erm because they, I don’t know, they might not, but it is everyone else’s, not business, but...

Discussion

The findings of this study are positive in the sense that the module impacts upon students’ thoughts and attitudes in ways which we deem appropriate: by the end of the module, students constructed gendered violence as largely a societal problem fostered by gendered norms and expectations about love and intimate relationships, and how these were perpetuated by institutional policies and practices. To this end it seemed that some students were inspired to seek future employment in this area in order to make a difference. It was also the case that students taking part in the focus group reported they appreciated the opportunity to have a ‘free’ space in which to reflect on the module and some felt this was an opportunity that should be repeated across all modules. This might be something the Department might want to reflect on in terms of gathering feedback on modules.

During the focus group, students were trying to make sense of their own personal thoughts and attitudes about gendered violence and about some of the issues that were raised during the module, for example, the influence of feminist perspectives. Whilst it is clear that students on the module could articulate their thoughts very-well in written coursework during the module (only one student, who rarely attended class, did not pass the module on first-sit), it seems that this academic ability is not matched in the verbal skills of students. Students seemed to struggle to make academic sense of their everyday experiences, evidenced in their unsophisticated narratives. We suggest that there are two reasons for this. Firstly, students are not given enough opportunities to practice speaking about academic writings. Secondly, students are not given enough opportunities to practice speaking about their everyday experiences. Whilst we recognise that seminar-work could be focused on these tasks, it is the modes of the assessment that we consider to have the

most meaningful impact upon students' thoughts and attitudes, and maybe, their future behaviours. It was Marton and Saljo (1976) that said it is the demands of the tasks that are set, such as the assessment methods, which determines the approach of learning (surface or deep) that learners adopt. Here, we turn our focus to problem-based learning, as the forerunner to creating student-centred powerful learning environments where students learn to analyse and solve authentic problems found in practice (Segers and Dochy, 2001).

The implications of this research point to changing the current modes of assessment within SSC 317 to the following:

- Assessment 1, Group-presentation.
- Assessment 2, Investigative Report Designing an Intervention.

In the first piece of assessment, the group-presentation, students will build the conceptual and theoretical frameworks to influence the design of an intervention that prevents gendered violence, for writing-up in assessment 2. In this setting, working in groups collaboratively, with the help of the tutor, allows students to co-learn about the world in order to think about how to solve complex and novel problems. In this way, we are seeking to develop communities of learners (see Matusov and Smith, 2007). The presentation will also develop students' ability to verbally articulate complex theoretical arguments about interpersonal violence.

Given the high number of students (67%) that said they would like to work in an organisation that deals with interpersonal violence, it is important that the assessment methods allow for students to build knowledge to link theory with practice and to build skills so that students can begin to think about how they can influence practice. In doing this, 'we' produce highly knowledgeable and skilled graduates for their chosen field of practice. Ultimately, then, by studying SSC 317, students will make a significant difference in the field of gendered violence, in ways which we consider appropriate.