

**Lessening sensitivity?  
Student experiences of teaching and learning sensitive issues**

**Abstract**

Despite growing interest in learning and teaching as emotional activities, there is still very little research on experiences of sensitive issues. Using qualitative data from students from a range of social science disciplines, this study investigates student's experiences. The paper highlights how although they found it difficult and distressing at times, the students all valued being able to explore sensitive issues during their studies. The paper argues that it is through repeated exposure to sensitive issues within the classroom that the students became more comfortable with the issues. This process of lessening sensitivity is an important part of the journey through higher education. It will argue that good student experiences need not always be positive emotions.

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## **Lessening sensitivity?:**

### **Student experiences of teaching and learning sensitive issues**

Despite growing interest in learning and teaching as emotional activities, there is still very little research on experiences of sensitive issues. The pockets of work that have taken place, have tended to focus on specific areas such as 'race' and ethnicity (e.g. Nixon and McDermott 2010) or sexuality (e.g. Clarke & Braun 2009) and whilst these have been an important development, more work is needed looking across social science disciplines to explore the commonalities of experiences. This paper is based on a small project<sup>1</sup> with staff and students that investigated potential cross-disciplinary issues. It sought to draw out what the informants themselves defined as sensitive, and positive and negative classroom strategies they had encountered or utilised. This paper draws from the student's experiences.

I will use the experiences of students to highlight the important value that they place on being able to explore issues that are sensitive even though it might be difficult at times. It will explore the ambivalence students had in relation to how staff should approach topics, and their understanding of the complexity of the issues. Moreover, the paper will highlight the importance of learning journeys in students' emotional experiences. The evidence suggests that despite the discomfort that certain classroom topics can cause, students believe that they are important to study. It will highlight some specific issues that need to be considered around emotional aspects of this type of learning.

### **Teaching and Learning Sensitive Issues**

As Lowe and Jones (2010) have argued, most topics have the capacity to be sensitive if they evoke an emotional response or there are competing ideas about how they should be understood or addressed. They argue that staff weave a difficult path through values, knowledge and skills when negotiating their way through the issues. Whichever path staff choose this will have a differential impact on students studying the topics. Whilst not all material that is covered in social science degree programmes will have personal resonance for students (or staff), it is probably inevitable that students will at some point have to reconsider aspects of their identity, experiences or beliefs about the world. Personal experiences can never be left completely outside the classroom and sometimes discovering theoretical explanations that relate to their experiences is positive for students, at other times it is not (Housee 2010). Moreover, the lecturer's own position will shape how the topic is

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approached and, therefore, the impact on students (Gill and Worley, 2010). In addition, students may encounter material that challenges their understanding of the world, and some might find that difficult (Lichtenstein, 2010). Working through these issues are important aspects of teaching and learning.

As Leathwood and Hey (2009) note there has been a growing interest in the emotional aspects of learning, although this has not been universally welcomed. They highlight the importance of gender in unpacking the idea of 'emotion-free' rationalist thinking in the construction of universities. They argue that the idea that emotions need to be excluded from rational thinking is built on the gendered divide within Cartesian dualism in which rational/mind/masculinity are seen as the opposite to emotion/body/femininity. They suggest that it is only by 'working with' emotions that it is possible to understand the complex ways that identities and positionality are reconstructed within higher education.

The notion that classrooms are 'spaces of feeling' is also highlighted by O'Byrne (2014:1). He argues that this is particularly the case where the subject material is making students rethink their place in humanity, such as human rights education. Students have to learn how to form an understanding within the competing definitions of what human rights are and, he suggests, this means that they have to learn to understand and manage their own feelings about the subject and their motivations for studying it. O'Byrne (2014) argues that whilst this journey may occur in discipline-based subjects, it is the bedrock of human rights education for a number of reasons including the lack of agreed definition and diverse motivations for study. In other words, this type of education challenges the notion that education is instrumental and goal-orientated (Cowden and Singh 2013). Yet as Haggis (2004) has argued, motivations for study are often a complex mix of both instrumental and academic/self-discovery reasons and learning for discovery need not undermine vocational aims. Indeed, as this study will show, students in a wide range of social science disciplines both expect, and want, to explore subjects that make them rethink their place in the world and that this is not disciplinary based.

Much of the work on education journeys has looked at transitions between places such as the transition to university or following degree studies into work. For example, Christie et al (2008) looked at the role of emotions in the transition to university and the importance of understanding the need to adapt learning styles in the context of different institutional everyday practices. Less attention has been given to transitions between years at university (Willcoxson et al 2011).

Willcoxson et al (2011) found that students leaving in their second and third years often doubted their ability. Todd's et al (2004) study illustrates the problems that students encountered moving from the guided learning within modules to the independence of a dissertation. They argue that whilst students appreciated the autonomy and authenticity, they struggled with aspects such as uncertainty and time management. Hence it could be argued that both Willcoxson et al (2011) and Todd's et al (2004) studies indicate that an emotional response to greater expectations *during* the degree was an issue. However, not all studies have found similar issues. Christie's (2009) study found that although significant issues were present for student from non-traditional backgrounds transitioning to university, there were no differences between second and final year students suggesting that it was the first year journey alone which stood out.

As Hobson and Morrison-Saunders (2013) have shown, it is the relationship between the subject, teachers and students that frame pedagogical experiences in the classroom. They argue that good teaching requires staff to encourage students to develop their own relationship with the subject. This has resonances with hooks' (1994) call that teaching is not just about sharing information but that teachers should 'share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students' and to do so in a way that 'respects and cares for the souls of our students' (1994: 13). In both accounts, the positionality of the teacher is central to teaching and learning. Importantly, one aspect of positioning is the identity of the teacher. For example, the ethnicity of the lecturer is visible and thus will inevitably impact on classroom interaction (Housee, 2008, Gill & Worley 2010). In other cases, staff may be able to choose between disclosing or not disclosing their relationship to the subject being studied. Yet if we understand teaching and learning as an embodied practice (hooks 2003) it is inevitable that whatever approach is taken, there will be an impact. This could be seen to be disruptive to the instrumental approach to education that, as Cowden and Singh (2013) have traced, increasingly encourages the standardisation of knowledge. Hence, it could be argued that as sensitive subjects are fundamental to good social science education, they are more likely to evoke passionate engagement by both staff and students.

### **Methodology**

This project qualitatively investigated students and lecturers' experiences of teaching and learning sensitive issues. It sought to attract a diverse sample in order to identify common issues. Recruitment was primarily on the Midlands area and from both pre and post 1992 universities. Ethical approval was received from Aston University. This paper focuses on the issues raised by the students.

There were three ways in which the students were recruited. Emails were sent out to students who had studied on modules that contained potentially sensitive issues (such as racism or domestic violence). At one university, students who were interested could sign up to take part during a day-long event for final year undergraduate students. Information about the research was also posted on relevant university Facebook pages and some students responded to this. In total 22 students participated in the study from three different universities. The majority of students took part in one of four focus groups, but a workshop was held at one university and one student was interviewed separately as she could not attend the focus group but wanted to take part.

The students were from a diverse range of discipline, and six of them were on joint-honours programmes so could reflect on two disciplines. The disciplines covered were sociology (14), business (5), psychology (4), social work (2) politics (1), music technology (1) and modern languages (1). In total, there were five taught postgraduate students, and 17 undergraduates, of which 12 were in their final year and five in their second year. The postgraduate students discussed both their undergraduate and postgraduate experiences. Students were asked to fill out a form giving some demographic details, but it was made clear that they did not have to answer any of these questions. There were 19 female students and 3 male participants in total, which is not unreflective of the gender balance in some of the main disciplines recruited from. The students were asked to describe their own ethnicity and the results were white British (12), Pakistani (2), Chinese (2), Bengali (1), British/Irish (1), Italian/Brazilian(1) Black African (1), Black Caribbean (1) and Mixed (1). Their ages ranged from 19-48. Students were also asked about their sexual identity and if they were religious. Of those that responded, three identified as LGBT and 15 as heterosexual. There were three students who identified as being Christian and three as Muslim. Three students wrote agnostic and 10 students stated that they had no faith. Only two students said that they had a disability, one reported depression and the other stated that they had dyslexia.

The fieldwork took place in private rooms on university campuses. The questions focused on what the informants thought sensitive issues were and how they had been dealt with in the classroom. It asked about the role of emotions in teaching and learning, and what they felt was good practice and when things had gone badly or had made them uncomfortable. Despite the potential sensitivity of the topics, the students all seemed quite comfortable in discussing the issues. Whilst some were more vocal than others were, efforts were made to ensure everyone had space to contribute by both the focus group participants and the researcher. On reflection, the relative ease of the focus

groups could probably be attributed the self-selecting and informed nature of the groups. The recruitment material made the topics clear and no incentives were offered so students who volunteered did so because they felt they had something to contribute. In addition, the majority of students would have received research methods training, and therefore had a technical understanding of focus groups. The confidence displayed in the informants is illustrated in the naming of staff they were critical of, including those likely to be known to the researcher.

The focus groups and interview were audio-recorded after consent had been given and the recordings were fully transcribed. The transcripts underwent thematic analysis following the steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts were read and reread and codes were generated from the data. The initial coding was then used to generate the significant themes of the research. NVIVO was used to help assist in this process. The quotations used in the paper are ones that best illustrated the themes under discussion.

### **Defining Sensitive Issues**

There was broad agreement from all the students that sensitive issues are an important part of degree education. For them, studying for a degree meant gaining knowledge to earn a qualification as well as developing a different way of questioning the world around them. This dual purpose was similar to that found by Haggis (2004). The students felt that university provided a good place to learn and debate sensitive issues. For example, typical responses about this issue were:

It felt like a safe place to talk about things, so, I think it was quite, it was spoken about very carefully but not too carefully that you don't learn enough. You know, not like treading around egg shells or anything but I thought that was good. (FG2)

So, I think that (...) it's definitely made us more confident like for me definitely, it's definitely made me more confident it's made me realise that there is no limit to what I can question and not to take anything for granted (FG1)

The consensus was that teaching and learning about sensitive issues was important, but it could be an uncomfortable experience. Moreover, the students all recognised that what was sensitive and/or challenging for one person might not be for another. Thus, as how sensitive a topic was would depend on the individual; it was a difficult to have a definitive list:

Delicate issues that... some people might find hard to discuss, whether it is because of their personal background or experiences (FG2)

It is also when you are challenging their ideas, like their ideas of gender and you know, it can be because it might be trying to sort of show a different side to something that they might not accept (FG3)

Yet within these broad definitions two main areas of sensitivity arose, those related to aspects of identity such as ethnicity, gender and religion and particular experiences such as rape, body size and mental illness. Discussion of both categories would mean that the classroom became a space of feeling (O'Byrne 2014).

Most of the students had experienced personal discomfort at some point because the issue was sensitive for them or they felt that they could not comment because of issues raised by others. For example, one student felt judged by her peers in a class discussing body size and several white students mentioned that they were not always very comfortable in discussing the impact of racism in a room with students from minority-ethnic groups. This latter issue is similar to findings of Housee (2008). On occasion, the classroom discussions had a longer-term impact as students re-evaluated friendships as opposing viewpoints emerged. For example, one female student described an incident in a final year module looking at issues connected to women's bodies:

There was one person who I have been friends with for a few years and some of his opinions that he came out with I was shocked. I had never heard him express those sort of opinions. (...) I still talk to him but he has got some dodgy opinions. What I thought to be anyway (FG4)

Other students also mentioned that they had assumed everyone at university would be 'broad minded' (FG1) as well as supportive of the principals of equality and had not expected racist or sexist viewpoints to be voiced as often as they were. Students stated that when staff heard, the incidents were usually dealt with well. However, many incidents were out of the earshot of staff and the students themselves were often uncertain about how to respond.

The role of disclosure was an area that many of the students mentioned and had led to both positive and negative learning experiences. The dilemmas it posed was neatly summed up in this exchange in Focus Group 2:

- Informant 2 I'd say it is helpful [to disclose], an insider into something (...) and it is always interesting to hear from someone who's actually experienced something. (...) But it makes you feel a bit uncomfortable because it kind of makes you...
- Informant 3 You don't know how to treat them afterwards (...) You dunno when you see them on the street and you know a secret piece of information (...)
- Informant 2 the other people in the room think, well, they have to be careful what they say next (...) [But] they must be very brave, you know, because it is a part of them. So they should be applauded.

This impact of peer-to-peer disclosure between students is an underexplored area and probably one that needs more consideration. Yet despite all the difficulties they raised, the student all strongly believed in the value of these classroom experiences.

### **Classroom issues**

Despite the consensus around the importance of studying difficult issues, students were much less certain about how they felt staff should approach subjects. The two most important areas that arose in the focus groups were their feelings about prior information and staff 'neutrality'.

In general, students wanted to know what was planned to be covered and appreciated staff acknowledging that the topics could be challenging for some students. Students felt that it was appropriate to be explicit in course materials, make it plain to students that they could leave classes if they were upset, and that they could go and talk to staff outside class about any issues. Students had had a range of experiences as to whether or not these points had been enacted, although no disciplinary differences emerged. Yet at the same time, they acknowledged that this was not always possible as the question of sensitivity was so personally defined. For example, one student (FG3) stated that having to defend her political alignment with Thatcherism was the most sensitive issue for her and she realised that this was unlikely to be case for other students. They also acknowledged that even if the headings in the course materials sounded sensitive, when they got into the classroom situation they found it was sometimes 'not as sensitive as they thought it was going to be' (FG1).



Students also reported that it was often discussions with their peers that upset them and that this was unpredictable even with prior warning about topics under discussion. For example, one student described her shock at one of her peers commenting that rape was not possible within marriage:

I genuinely thought that everyone in our group had a very broad and open mind but then when she started coming out with comments [...] how can somebody think like that? Especially when they're a student as well, and for me, that really threw me off. [...] It's like I dunno, you, I was in a state of confusion cos I just couldn't get over the fact that, I just thought we were all educated, you know? (FG1)

This was a particular issue when working in small groups and they appreciated that staff could not always intervene. Yet at the same time, they usually valued the small groups as safe spaces to discuss the issues, even with this uncertainty. A more debated issue was the stance that lecturers took within classes.

Clearly, there were some areas where students knew that staff would take a particular position, for example an anti-racist stance in classes mentioning ethnicity. In other areas, such as abortion or prostitution, students were divided as to whether or not staff should make clear their position in relation to the debates. For example, in focus group 4, the consensus was the staff should try not to display which side of an argument that they were on. One student stated:

in [name] module what, eight, nine weeks of very sensitive issues and erm, I don't know [staff member]'s opinion on anything. So I think that's really really good because erm, there was loads of erm questions going on and I learnt so much, there was clearly a lot of different opinions going around that class. Lots of questions, I think that was the way forward. (FG4)

In contrast, students in focus group 2 held the opposite view and felt that whilst it was important for staff to summarise different arguments, staff positionality was not an issue, and it actually contributed to the discussions. As one student said:

I'd say passion is very important for getting people to interact with their lecturers. Cos I've had a couple of lecturers where certain fields they really enjoy it and you can tell they enjoy talking about it but then I do think they do have to [...] say 'I might not agree with this but

here is the evidence for the other side of the argument and sort of neutralise it but also show the passion that they have for a certain, for their view (FG2).

The issue of staff positionality was the one area that differences in discipline seemed to be significant. Sociology students were more likely to say that they could challenge the position of staff than business students. Psychology students were divided on the issue. However, this could not fully account for the very different positions that the focus groups took. For the students who raised concerns about this, it was the assessments that they were particularly anxious about. Some students reported constructing arguments that they thought staff would prefer to read, as this comment illustrates:

Because I was thinking if, if we put something in the exam that she didn't like, would we get a bad mark? And I know that wouldn't, that's technically totally against University regulation (FG4).

Students reported that they needed a lot of reassurance from staff that taking a different line of argument from that supported by their lecturer would not have an adverse impact on their marks. The power relationships inherent within assessment processes were at the forefront of their concerns despite recognition that there were formal mechanisms in place to protect students such as blind second-marking. Hence, despite their desire for 'learning for discovery' students were still grounded in instrumental learning issues (Haggis 2004).

### **Time to develop**

Throughout the discussions, length of study emerged as a significant issue as to how comfortable students were discussing sensitive topics. Time was an important factor both within modules, and over the years of study. In general, students reported being more comfortable discussing sensitive topics towards the end of modules and the more years that they had spent studying.

The desire students had for prior information outlined above is an important issue within temporal considerations. It took time for staff to ensure that students fully understood what would be studied. Students also needed to know more than just listing them on the course guide. For example, one student reported that although she knew that rape was in the curriculum, she was not prepared for the detail within the class:

The week before, that it should be made known that next week, we're going to be doing this.(...) I mean I have sat there and I've felt the tears welling up (...) So I think it's needed but just a warning.. (...). I think it was [*in the module outline*]. But I didn't expect it to be in such detail. (student interview)

This need to build up to sensitive areas is a clear indicator of the importance of time in the learning process. Students needed time to be comfortable within the module and with the subject material that was due to be covered.

More prominent an issue that arose was the time spent studying over the course of the degree, and this was a frequent issue raised in the focus groups. In general terms, the longer time the students had spent at university the more comfortable they were with sensitive subject issues. Each year spoke of being more confident and comfortable than they had been in previous years. Hence, it was not surprising that the postgraduate students felt in a better position than the undergraduates did. There were three different elements that emerged as time-relative: developing a knowledge base, developing staff relationships, and gaining confidence. These are illustrated in the following quotations:

I think it's also how confident and how comfortable you feel with your knowledge as well. (...) in third year I felt really comfortable and I used to really challenge them and take them heads on everything. (...) but it took me like first year, second year, I really used to struggle I used to think I should have said something, why did I hold my breath, why didn't I say anything, you know? (FG1)

So I think, your sort of relationship develops with them [*staff*] as well, you become more, you sort of know who you can talk to and, I think even specific lecturers, they became a lot more approachable towards the end. (...) there is like, two of them that, before I was almost scared of them in my first and second years. I was like I can't talk to them they're really quite..., but now, I can just you know, send them an email, just knock on their door (FG3)

It pulls me out of my comfort zone which is good, because I've led, probably a very closed life. A lot of the issues, talking about them, still very new to me (...) I know the last two years have certainly helped bring me out (...) we can talk about things that I would never have spoken about to anyone. (student interview).

What emerged from the accounts of the students is that over time, topics that they may have found difficult to consider became less sensitive through addressing them in the classroom. Hence, it is only by and through teaching and learning sensitive issues that the students gain the confidence, knowledge and skills that helps them to be comfortable with the topics. Yet what emerged from these accounts of emotional learning journeys is that students want exposure to issues to ensure they acquire a knowledge base and confidence, yet simultaneously to potentially delay more difficult topics to later points within their studies. This is a difficult balance to get right, especially as sensitive issues are so personally defined.

***'We've been successfully desensitised' (FG1)***

Despite speaking about times of discomfort and upset, all of the students were positive about the space that university gave them to explore sensitive issues and felt that this was fundamental to social science education. The quotation above was made by a postgraduate student, reflecting on how they had come to understand that everything could be comfortably discussed. This process of lessening sensitivity needs to be understood as an emotional journey, and careful introduction of topics both within and between years can help develop student confidence in teaching and learning sensitive issues. Whilst assessment and grades were always important, the need to develop the skills to critically understand the world around them is still considered an essential element in social science education. Cowden and Singh (2013) have illustrated the growing pressure on staff to focus on issues that will increase positive student ratings despite having a negative impact on student's learning. The emphasis on positivity risks losing sight of the fact that classroom discomfort can be a successful learning experience.

Zembylas and Boler's (2002) developed the concept of 'pedagogy of discomfort' as a way of theorising the resistance to challenges of dominant norms in the classroom. They argue that discomfort can be utilised as a way of critically engaging with hegemonic power. Amsler (2011) develops this further and argues that considering emotional elements of teaching and learning does not mean prioritising student satisfaction and wellbeing, but that it is an essential part of transformational education. This project has illustrated that these students agree with this position. The students desired intellectual engagement even when it was uncomfortable and valued the space that it gave them to think through with sensitive issues.

Yet a number of practical issues arise from this research. Students value information on upcoming topics and wish to know of additional sources of advice and support. Yet as what students find sensitive varies, it is not always clear how this could be done. Signposting counselling services in classes on sexual violence is straightforward, but what support is possible for a right-wing student who feels that arguing for Thatcher is untenable? The position of staff could clearly make a difference here, but again there is no straightforward approach that can be easily adopted. Students do not necessarily agree as to whether or not they should know the position of staff. Even if a neutral approach is taken in class, staff publications usually reveal positionality. This study suggests that students are aware and understand these complexities. Hence although we need to ensure that we take appropriate 'educational care', this does not mean a sanitised approach. Students appreciate that social science degrees *require* an emotional learning journey; they just need staff to openly recognise it. Hence, whilst students would prefer increased reassurance about assessment criteria, they do not necessarily want to change the curriculum.

When encouraging students in debate and dialogue on sensitive issues, staff need to be aware of the relationships between students. The issues of peer power relationships have been documented by a number of commentators (e.g. Holloway and Stuart 1995, Housee 2010) and this is clearly an important consideration. However, this study suggests that classroom disclosure may also lead to ongoing issues for students. Hayes-Smith et al (2010) has documented the issues for staff when students make personal disclosures of sexual assault and domestic violence. They argue that this can cause difficulties both in terms of the emotional wellbeing of staff and the ongoing student/staff relationship. It is possible that when students experience unexpected disclosures from others who are not among their close circle of friends that they might also be placed in a position of uncertainty, and this warrants further investigation.

This project has shown that staff need to be aware of student uncertainty, discomfort and distress, but they do not necessarily need to be eliminated. Following hooks (1994), I would argue that 'caring for the souls' of students does not mean eliminating negative emotions in the classroom. It is by working with and through sensitive subjects that students learn the critical skills necessary not just for their degree, but to be able to think deeply about wider societal issues (Amsler 2011). Hooks (2003) argues that the imperative of modern education that focuses students on their future lives makes it difficult for them to experience learning for its own sake. Indeed, this is an intrinsic part of the neo-liberal university (Cowden and Singh 2013). This project has shown that part of the value of

teaching sensitive issues is that it gives them spaces in which to value education in non-instrumental ways.

## **Conclusions**

Teaching and learning sensitive issues is an important part of social science education and students value these opportunities even when they have felt moments of discomfort or distress. Negative emotions do not necessarily mean a poor student experience. The students wanted details about subject material and additional support, yet they also recognise that this is not always possible as what people find as sensitive is varied. Staff need to recognise that it is often peer-to-peer issues that are the most problematic for students, and this can include the impact of student disclosure. Whilst there are mixed views on whether or not staff should take a neutral approach, this project suggests staff should provide reassurance over assessment. This project shows that it is the increasing knowledge and confidence gained through their studies that is important in making students secure about this fundamental part of the emotional learning journey *through* higher education.

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