Teaching Sensitive Issues: Feminist Pedagogy and the Practice of Advocacy-Based Counseling

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It is not that some students bring their private troubles into the classroom; rather, teachers of sociology bring into the classroom some topics that resonate with their students’ lives.

—Konradi 16

In our experience, most instructors have dealt with a student “crisis” in some form. When a paper is late, an assignment incomplete, an exam missed, or a lecture skipped, students seeking special accommodations from instructors frequently share (often unsolicited) intimate details about their personal lives. Sometimes the situation has been resolved; other times it is apparent that the student is still having problems. In some cases, the instructor has only clues about a student’s distress—spotty attendance, changes in behavior and/or appearance, a comment made in class.

College instructors are increasingly faced with these situations. According to a 2006 survey that focused on events occurring in the previous year, ten percent of college students reported that they had contemplated suicide (ACHA, Reference 13), 12 percent were or had been in an emotionally abusive relationship, nine percent had a family member or friend die, and 18 percent were concerned enough about a “troubled” family member or friend that it affected their academic performance (ACHA, Reference 6). Almost half of all college students reported that they had experienced a depressive episode severe enough to interfere with their daily activities, and “the rate of students reporting ever being diagnosed with depression has increased 56% in the last six years” (ACHA “Data Facts”). An estimated 21 percent of full-time U.S. college students have problems with alcohol and 44 percent are binge drinkers, yet fewer than four percent have sought treatment (Wu, Pilowsky, Schlenger, and Hasin 192). Away from family, friends, and other social networks, students may feel that they have few resources available to help them.

As instructors of courses that focus on social problems, we have found that many students have personal connections to the course material, having had similar experiences or having witnessed a friend or relative struggle with these issues. These types of personal connections to course material sometimes trigger crises for our students or bring existing crises to our attention. This may happen for several reasons. First, in our classes that focus on domestic violence, some students feel shame or guilt about their experiences. For example, survivors of domestic violence may feel “ashamed” of their abuse, want...
to “keep the incident private,” or feel that their descriptions of their experiences would not be believed if they shared them with others (Tjaden and Thoennes 50). This may happen in other disciplines or types of classes where the students self-identify as someone who has experienced the topic at hand. For example, a psychology, biology, or medical student previously diagnosed as bipolar may be ashamed or embarrassed by a conversation about human biochemistry, mental disorders, medications, or therapeutic techniques.

Second, many of the teaching materials used by instructors are inherently emotive. Instructors often choose to incorporate materials such as personal narratives or movies that include dramatizations of incidents in an attempt to generate interest and stimulate discussion. These materials may overlap across disciplines. For example, a film about radiation sickness after the bombing of Hiroshima could be used in classes ranging from a “chemistry in context” course to a twentieth century history course to an international relations course. Similarly, material from the murder of Amish schoolgirls or the shootings at Virginia Tech could be used in sociology, women’s studies, psychology, or anthropology courses. Unsurprisingly, these materials evoke a wide range of responses from students—including shock, disbelief, anger, tears, and/or depression—that can even compel some students to physically leave the classroom.

Finally, the dynamics of the classroom environment itself can exacerbate responses to the course material. Students come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, and most do not know each other. This can create problems when discussing emotionally charged subjects. For example, discussions about domestic violence are often difficult to negotiate in the classroom, as domestic violence intersects with deeply held beliefs about gender, sexuality, family, and religion. Even to come up with a definition of what actions can be considered “domestic violence” can quickly reveal schisms within the classroom as to the rights and responsibilities accorded to various members of the family unit.

Discussions within the classroom linking inequalities in the social structure with oppression often include stereotypical images of both the marginalized and the privileged and rely on cognitive schemas to explain and justify these social roles as well as to proscribe and prescribe behavior. These stereotypical images and norms for behavior are quite limiting and rarely reflect lived experience. Students may feel they have been victimized, but if they feel that their experiences, behaviors, or emotions do not fit into stereotypical images of victimization, they may question whether their claims of victimization are legitimate. Similarly, disjunctures exist between popularized images of oppressors and students who relate stories that reveal their exploitation of others.

After these types of lectures and classroom discussions, students who have a personal connection with these issues will often contact professors. Students may reach out because they believe their instructor to be an “expert” on the topic, because the issue is no longer taboo (since it was discussed in class), and/or because they perceive that the instructor will not be judgmental. This may be done in a number of different ways—through a phone call, an email after class, a note written on a quiz or in-class assignment, a post on a class listserv, a meeting during office hours, or a simple after-class con-
conversation. It can take different forms—a confessional statement that the student has experienced these issues in the past, an offer to share personal experiences with others, a query for help for the student or a “friend,” or an expression of frustration about how the topic has been framed in class or in society. After a lecture on the impacts of the drug Rohypnol (an illegal but commonly used “date rape” drug) on human physiology, a student in Alesha’s Women in Contemporary Society course told her, “last semester I would have been bored by this stuff, like a lot of the other students during lecture today, but I wish they would pay attention, because these things really do happen—it happened to me last week at a party.”

As social scientists, these dynamics intrigued us; as instructors, we recognized that the problems that have arisen during our classes were not solely our students’ problems. Rather, it was our responsibility to create a non-oppressive classroom. When we discussed these issues with other instructors, we realized that these types of reactions were quite common, even across disciplines. An instructor teaching a Science and Society course commented, “even though my lectures don’t normally elicit these kinds of things, I had a student write a note to me the other day on their in-class assignment, telling me about their ‘friend’s problem.’”

We found numerous well-written resources to aid instructors planning to teach about social problems, including discussions of pedagogical approaches (Konradi 16), sample syllabi (Kaelber and Carroll 44), and other exercises (Hollander 193) designed to give students a deeper understanding of the sociological foundations and consequences of oppression and inequality. We also found a wealth of materials about creating affirming learning environments in the classroom, facilitating discussion about sensitive topics (Rosenbloom and Fetner 448), active listening, etc. Yet we still struggled to understand our responsibilities towards students in crisis. As we grappled with this question, we found that we relied less on pedagogical literature and more on the theoretical frameworks and skills that we each learned as domestic violence advocates—and frequently applied this knowledge in our teaching.

However, because we are now situated within academia, we have also had to struggle with an equally important question—what are the limits of our responsibilities as instructors to these students? To what extent can or should we modify the traditional instructor/student relationship to assist students in crisis, and in what ways should that relationship not change? We began writing this paper to assist other instructors who find themselves in situations where their students are in crisis, and we hope that it stimulates further discourse about the unique responsibilities of instructors teaching about social phenomena that reflect experiences in their students’ lives.

Advocacy-Based Counseling: A New Resource for Feminist Instructors

Both of us have navigated between the theoretical and physical spaces of domestic violence advocacy and academia over the last ten years: Alesha became a domestic violence advocate after first teaching in academia, and Karen worked at a domestic violence program for several years before entering academia. Through conversations on feminist pedagogy, we
realized that we both draw heavily on the analytics of Advocacy-Based Counseling (ABC) in our work as instructors of sociology and women’s studies courses.

Part of the reason that we felt comfortable using ABC in the classroom is that it shares many of the same goals and guiding principles as feminist pedagogy. The feminist classroom is a “liberatory classroom” that “builds on the experiences of the participants.” (Shrewsbury 170). According to Carolyn Shrewsbury (166) and Lynne Webb, Kandi Walker and Tamara Bollis (418), some of the core principles of feminist pedagogy include:

- recognition that social inequalities exist in society;
- empowerment of the student;
- a “reformation” of the professor-student relationship so that all individuals both share and acquire knowledge;
- privileging the individual voice, and;
- the respect and valuation of diverse personal experiences.

As with feminist pedagogy, the core goal of ABC is to address individual and societal inequalities through the empowerment of individuals. The advocate attends to the ways that macro-level problems manifest themselves in individual situations, and she or he seeks to identify and change these inequalities. The ABC approach is also similar to feminist pedagogy in that it subverts the traditional social service model by shifting the power from the advocate to the survivor. According to the ABC perspective, the individual is the expert on her own situation. Therefore, the role of the outsider (teacher or advocate) is not to “fix” the problem. Rather, it is to help the person chart options and to provide space for the person to choose the most appropriate path. Another key component of the ABC model is recognizing that the person and the problems she is facing are analytically distinct. In other words, the person is viewed as a capable individual facing difficult circumstances. This model does not construct causal links (e.g., “what did this person do to cause or contribute to this problem?”).

From the assumptions outlined above, ABC has developed several interrelated practices. These practices are discussed in greater detail later in this article:

- Listening. Theoretically informed, active listening forms the core practice of ABC. Many theorists have argued that the lived experiences of individuals “should be central to a feminist pedagogy” (Ryan 23). Active listening by instructors and other students facilitates this process.
- Maintaining confidentiality to the greatest extent possible.
- Refusing the role of decision-maker. The person facing problems must decide how to proceed. This involves not making decisions for the person (e.g., telling the person “what you should do is . . . ”) and redirecting requests to make decisions.
- Believing the speaker. ABC does not involve evaluating the legitimacy of the speaker’s claims. Instead it aims to work with the material that the speaker presents to the advocate or teacher.

One other element of ABC that should be emphasized is the importance of tailoring each of these practices to best serve the individual person in need. Flexibility is a critical component of effective advocacy, and instructors should expect that the tools we describe throughout the remainder of the paper will need to be adapted to
meet the needs of a diverse student population. The battered women’s movement has been justly criticized for its focus on the problems of white middle- and upper-class women, and for failing to address issues faced by women of color and women in poverty, who are constrained by multiple, interlocking forms of oppression (see Richie 1134; Crenshaw 1242). We are not suggesting that ABC is the only way to meaningfully address student issues that arise when teaching about sensitive issues; in fact, by applying ABC principles to classroom settings, we hope to foster conversations about the potentials and limitations of this approach.

Planning the Class: Preparing Students to Process Course Content

Although it is inevitable that some students will have strong reactions to certain types of course material, instructors can do many things in advance to help students both prepare for and process the material presented. Konradi (14), Gardner (96), and Yllo (20) discuss different ways instructors can structure both the course and the classroom setting to facilitate student learning and enable students to better cope with inherently emotional material. These include critically examining course material to insure that it does not objectify individual victims or marginalized groups, creating a balanced reading list that does not focus exclusively on victimization, and ordering class topics so that instructors introduce theoretical or conceptual material first and more difficult material and/or classroom discussions later in the course, after students have developed social relationships with both the instructor and each other. Konradi also recommends developing ground rules for class discussions with students during the first week of the course, well before having the discussions themselves (18). Instructors should also give students the option to leave class or miss some of these later class sessions that cover difficult, perhaps personal material.

Both Konradi (19) and Gardner (97) also suggest that instructors provide students with a list of appropriate resources available to them in their geographic area, so that students are better able to assist themselves and/or their friends if they are in crisis. We recommend that instructors provide both general and culturally-specific resources; while some students will prefer to use culturally-specific resources in order to receive services that can better meet their individual needs, other students may desire the greater anonymity afforded by using more general resources (some cultural communities are so small that the student may feel that the public nature of accessing those resources outweighs the relative benefits).

Instructors can find general and culturally-specific resources in several places. An Internet search can quickly locate national organizations that usually have information about specific services in the instructor’s local area. For example, an Internet search on “depression” listed the National Mental Health Information Center (http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov), which has a “services locator” prominently displayed on their home page. Be sure to investigate these links carefully and choose nationally-known organizations that clearly state their mission, target population, and services.

Resources for students are often available on campus. Many institutions have student health centers; some provide
mental health services or work closely with mental health providers. They may also have resource guides, fact sheets, and/or the names and phone numbers of agencies in the area that address issues students commonly face. Instructors can also contact their department and/or the Dean’s office; they may have already developed protocols and resource networks for dealing with these problems (it is highly unlikely that your student is the first one to face this particular issue.) Campus police at large colleges and universities also have procedures for dealing with such safety issues as stalking or domestic violence, and instructors can contact them for more information.

Finally, most large municipalities have a 24-hour crisis line that can be used in almost any situation. Most local phone books have a “community resources” page that includes the number of this crisis line as well as contact information for a variety of local social service agencies. If there is not a crisis line in your area, you can refer students to one of several national 24-hour crisis lines: RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)’s Sexual Assault Hotline is 1-800-656-HOPE, and the HopeLine Suicide Hotline is 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433). Alesha puts the phone number of the local crisis line in the syllabus for her course on “Women and Violence,” and students have had a positive response to its inclusion.

Administrators can also compile similar lists of campus, local, and national resources and distribute them to departments, faculty, staff, and students across campus. These resources should be made available both in print and online (via the campus website) so that they can be easily and confidentially accessed when needed. Ideally, the campus should have a resource and referral center that can answer student, faculty, and staff questions and help strategize responses to these situations. If students and instructors are not aware of or cannot access these resources, they cannot appropriately and effectively respond to a student in crisis. A poignant example of this is the case of Rebecca Griego, who was shot and killed by an ex-boyfriend in her office at the University of Washington on April 2, 2007. Although the University had set up a workplace violence-prevention assessment team who could have given Griego additional resources for her protection, they were not contacted by campus police, Griego, or her department (Bhatt A1). It is unclear whether Griego or her department even knew such resources existed. Information about these types of resources is critical in many situations.

In addition to providing students with a list of resources, instructors may also want to invite an advocate from a local social service agency or campus organization to come and speak with the class. These agencies generally dedicate resources to community education, and their services are usually free of charge. We have found that having an advocate speak with students makes these resources feel much more accessible to students than simply providing phone numbers. Another benefit of bringing in an advocate as a guest speaker is that it reinforces the distinction between instructor and counselor (and it may be useful to make this distinction explicit through classroom discussions about advocacy). In addition to assisting students in crisis, advocates can also connect interested students with outside volunteer opportunities.
Finally, guest speakers can teach students practical skills that empower them both emotionally and physically. For example, Portnow argues that learning self-defense is a “transformational learning experience” because it “not only increases knowledge, but more importantly, leads to deep and pervasive shifts in the learner’s perspective and understanding” (qtd. in Cermele 3). In one of Alesha’s classes, a Crime Prevention Officer from the campus police department came to a class session and taught self-defense techniques and strategies. One student commented that the “hardest part wasn’t pretending to hit or kick. It was yelling ‘NO!’ when the police officer asked us to.” Most students started the class saying “no” quietly or while laughing, but by the end of the self-defense training, their shouts echoed through the room and down the hall—a reflection of the empowerment they felt over their own safety. The instructor can then help contextualize and historicize the material guest speakers present.

However, no amount of careful classroom preparation or exercises changes the fact that there are many tough issues tackled in courses that elicit strong reactions from students. We argue that simply asking students to talk to you after class or giving students referrals to services is not enough; part of the task of teaching is mapping out an effective strategy for dealing with a student in crisis. Below, we discuss key elements involved in strategizing appropriate responses.

Listening to Students in Crisis

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. (Lorde 302)

The deceptively simple act of listening forms the core practice of Advocacy-Based Counseling and the most effective tool for responding to students in crisis. Survivors of violence repeatedly told Karen in her capacity as a domestic violence legal advocate that her ability to listen, without turning away, was the most useful “service” they received from the agency. Pedagogical literature details the importance of listening to students in classroom and advising situations (University of Michigan Rackham School of Graduate Studies 11; hooks 149; Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet 138). Because victimization is often stigmatizing, listening is especially crucial. Many students in crisis have chosen or been forced into silence—to protect those responsible for their oppression, to protect themselves and/or their identity, or to protect their children. For many survivors who reach out to instructors, this may be the first time they have disclosed their experiences to anyone. By simply listening to students retell their lived experience, instructors help students process what has happened to them.

At the same time, instructors need to get specific information from the student in order to assess her needs and determine if there is an immediate threat to her safety. Instructors should also structure student interactions so that instructors can assist students in identifying and accessing available resources. Key steps to effective, active listening with students in crisis include clearing a space for listening, conveying a readiness to listen, and listening actively and attentively to crisis stories.
CLEAR SPACE FOR LISTENING

Whenever possible, instructors should make time for students in crisis at the moment when they disclose information in class or when they seek assistance instead of making an appointment or asking them to return during office hours. It can be extremely difficult for students in crisis to talk about their experiences in class or to approach instructors about personal issues after class, especially when family and friends may be critical of decisions. When an instructor “moves on” in class without taking the time to clear space for listening, or when they ask a student to come back during office hours, the students may interpret the delay as lack of interest or support.

Often the best way to clear space for listening in the classroom is to be direct with the students about the emotional impacts of the material. When Alesha showed the documentary *Deliver Us from Evil* (about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church), many students had strong responses to the film. Several students were visibly crying during the movie, and one student left the room, coming back a few minutes later with a fistful of tissues that she distributed to the students around her. Prior to showing the movie, Alesha had planned to give the students a fifteen-minute break after the film (the running time is nearly two hours; the class session is three hours). Given the intense reaction the students had to the movie, however, she decided to begin the discussion immediately. She first acknowledged the situation by stating, “That was an intense movie, wasn’t it?” She then normalized the students’ strong emotional reactions by saying, “The first time I saw this movie, I had a difficult time watching it, and it doesn’t get any easier each time you see it.” Finally, she cleared space for listening by saying, “I know that usually we take a break at this time, but because this is such an intense movie, I first want to check in with you. What did you find compelling about the movie?” This signaled to the students that Alesha was interested in hearing their responses to the movie while at the same time allowing the students to direct the conversation. At the end of class, students told Alesha that they appreciated the fact that they could talk about their reactions “in the moment” since they “would have felt awkward” discussing them after taking a break.

When it is not feasible to address the issue in class or to speak with the student right away, instructors can affirm that they are glad that the student reached out and emphasize their desire to follow up with the student as soon as possible. For example, when a student came up to Alesha towards the end of the class break and wanted to talk about her family’s experience with the Catholic Church, she listened for a few minutes and, when there was a break in the conversation, said, “This film must have been really hard for you to watch. I’d like to talk with you more about this, but we have to get started. Do you have time to continue this conversation after class?”

Instructors should try to anticipate student responses to difficult material and, if possible, bring resource information (such as a crisis hotline or campus mental health services) with them to class. This information can be given to students in a nonintrusive manner by writing it on the board or by including it on PowerPoint slides. That way students who are not comfortable sharing their experiences or contacting their instructor can still get the services they need.
CONVEY A READINESS TO LISTEN

In addition to creating space for students to speak, instructors need to convey to their students a readiness to listen. Students consistently report that one of their greatest frustrations with their instructor is that she seems distracted and inattentive when students talk with her (University of Michigan Rackham School of Graduate Studies 11). By conveying a readiness to listen, instructors signal to their students that they are interested in what students have to say and that their contributions to the course are valued.

Alesha was at a lecture on female genital circumcision/mutilation (FGC/M), and the speaker asked the audience a question about the moral culpability of mothers who performed FGC/M on their daughters. After a brief pause, a woman in the audience responded—but within a few seconds, it became apparent from the speaker’s verbal and nonverbal cues (and often the lack thereof) that the speaker was busy preparing his response rather than continuing to listen to the woman. Nonverbally, he failed to make eye contact with the woman, but instead started reading his notes. He did not lean in toward the speaker, but instead hunched over the table where he was sitting. Verbally, he failed to give prompts that encourage continued conversation such as “yes” or “and then?” He also started to speak when she paused between sentences instead of allowing her to finish what she was saying. Each of these verbal and nonverbal cues is important to students in the classroom as well.

When meeting with a student outside of class, an instructor can show her or his readiness to listen by asking open-ended questions that invite the student to describe her experiences. Open-ended questions such as “What’s going on?” or “Can you tell me a little bit about your situation?” are good ways to initiate these types of conversations. Because every instructor has concrete limits on his or her time, make sure to let the student know how much time you have. This helps the student pace herself and prioritize what needs to be discussed. Some instructors place clocks behind students, so that they can check the time without looking down at their watches (University of Michigan Rackham School of Graduate Studies 11).

LISTEN ACTIVELY AND ATTENTIVELY TO CRISIS STORIES

Retelling their stories is vitally important for people in crisis. The simple act of articulating their stories on their own terms and without the narrowing force of structured questions is healing in and of itself. One of the characteristics of victimization is that those in power seek to impose their view of reality on others. This “reality” may include “facts” such as: the oppressed person is damaged, undeserving of treatment reserved for those with privilege, deserving of the treatment they receive, or incapable of autonomy. As one woman at a battered women’s shelter said, “I always thought of myself as a strong, confident woman. But my husband told me I was stupid every day—for ten years. After a while, I began to believe it.” For this woman, hearing her own voice articulating her own reality was the first
and most important step to reclaiming a sense of control over her life. Although this sounds simple, listening actively and attentively to crisis stories may be one of the more difficult tasks for an instructor to accomplish. As instructors, we evaluate and critique student knowledge and performance. We provide constant feedback on what students say and write throughout the course. Thus it would be easy to assume the same role with the student in this situation, to interrupt the student’s narrative with commentary, unnecessary questions, or feedback before the student has finished speaking. It is important to remember that this situation is different from many other situations in which students look to instructors (appropriately) to give them “the answers.” It is tempting to tell a student what to do, especially after listening to a harrowing story that ends with “please tell me what to do now.”

However, it is equally important not to fall into an inattentive silence. By removing themselves from the conversation altogether, listeners may convey disinterest in the narrative—and students will quickly stop speaking. An effective listener needs to negotiate the middle ground between the two. By maintaining eye contact with the student, giving nonverbal and non-intrusive verbal cues that encourage the speaker to continue talking, allowing the student pauses in the conversation, and taking notes if necessary, an instructor can convey his or her attentiveness to the student, which will encourage her to speak more freely about her own experiences.

Because of the diversity of lived experiences that students bring to the classroom, students may experience the same degree of crisis as a result of what appear to be qualitatively different experiences. Some students may describe incidents that may seem relatively “minor,” while others may relate events that sound catastrophic. Instructors should be careful not to minimize what sound like “minor” incidents, as the emotional impact of them can be quite strong.

When listening to graphic accounts of more serious events, instructors should attempt to convey their concern, not shock. Concern shows the instructor’s engagement and commitment to the student while allowing the conversation to move forward. Statements of shock or surprise may make the student feel isolated and heighten feelings of stigmatization. Shock is also a “paralyzing” emotion, stopping the flow of conversation and hindering the progress towards solutions.

In a senior thesis class, Karen was caught off guard by a student who explained that he did not want to participate in a group writing project because he wanted to focus on his experiences as a soldier in Iraq. The revelation that he had been a soldier, combined with the possibility that he was returning to a combat zone, caused Karen to act more shocked than concerned—her body tensed up, and she asked in a surprised tone, “Do you have to go back?” The subsequent conversation then centered on her concerns for the student instead of focusing on his concerns (he did not want to participate in a group exercise because he did not feel that other, “traditional,” students could understand his experiences. In his words, “It wasn’t like a study abroad program to France”). This experience caused Karen to think through the reasons why these issues were particularly difficult for her and to
find resources (in this case, from other instructors) to enable her to listen to student stories with an appropriate level of concern instead of shock.

**CONFIDENTIALITY AND ITS LIMITATIONS**

An explicit understanding of rules around confidentiality is a cornerstone of Advocacy-Based Counseling that we integrate into our feminist pedagogy. Without a clear understanding of rules regarding confidentiality, students in crisis have little control over how their disclosures may affect their academic and personal lives—and we know from experience that such disclosures can have dramatic consequences on their ability to continue both in the class and in their academic program. For example, students with children who disclose that they are homeless may fear that Child Protection Services (CPS) will “take” their children. Students using street drugs may fear that if their use is reported they will be forced to leave school and/or fail to qualify for financial aid. Because of the risks involved with self-disclosure, instructors need to emphasize both the importance of confidentiality and its limitations.

As many of us do in our classes, Karen uses the initial class session for students to establish collaborative “ground rules” to use throughout the course. She has found that students reliably bring up several general points such as respecting different points of view, speaking respectfully, allowing all students to speak, etc. In Karen’s experience, students rarely mention confidentiality in these discussions. If students do not mention it, Karen uses the following prompt: “If we talk about personal issues in this class such as abuse, what additional ground rules might be helpful?” This generally elicits conversations about confidentiality that generate “rules” such as “what we say in here stays in here,” or “this should be a safe space to talk.” Karen then uses student comments to further explore the importance and limitations of confidentiality in the classroom.

Alesha uses the syllabus to alert students to issues around confidentiality. She uses the following language:

Occasionally this course will cover sensitive and/or explicit material regarding sexuality, health, body image, and violence. Many people find that they have strong emotional reactions to some of the topics or materials we use. If any problems arise for you, please see me to discuss a reasonable solution.

You should also be aware that I am a mandated reporter—I am required to report any situation where someone’s physical safety is at risk. This does NOT include hypothetical situations or past situations where there is no present or future risk. If you have any questions, please contact me.

As obvious as it sounds, it bears emphasizing that instructors must share information regarding the limits of confidentiality, including instructor legal responsibilities, before students divulge personal information. This allows students to make informed decisions regarding personal disclosure. Alesha’s syllabus language does just that. This statement alerts students to the types of materials that will be included in the course, normalizes any emotional responses that the student might have to the material, and provides them with a strategy for coping if they feel overwhelmed. This statement then explicitly states the conditions under which the
instructor would have to break confidentiality and take action.

If and when instructors are required to break confidentiality varies from institution to institution. We first became aware of these issues in our role as domestic violence advocates. Like many social service providers, we were required by law to report information disclosed to us if it was apparent that someone was in immediate physical danger—i.e., we needed to call CPS if a survivor told us her children were in danger of being abused. Legally, we could be held liable if we failed to act. This policy is called “mandatory reporting”; most states adopted some variation of a mandatory reporting law after 1976, when the family of a murdered woman successfully sued the Regents of the University of California (Tarasoff v. Regents of University of California, 17 Cal. 3d 425, 551 P.2d 334, 131 Cal. Rptr. 14 [Cal. 1976]). The family argued successfully that the University was negligent because the campus police, alerted by a mental health provider, failed to warn the victim or the victim’s family of the perpetrator’s intentions to kill the victim. Because the scope of mandatory reporting laws varies from state to state, instructors (especially state employees) should check with the administration of their institution to determine whether or not they are subject to mandatory reporting.

The importance of confidentiality is not new to feminist teachers. Through our personal experience and in dialogue with other instructors, however, we realize that many of us have been caught off guard when students divulge personal information. We therefore emphasize the importance of pro-actively crafting a plan that enables instructors to simultaneously affirm confidentiality while alerting students to its limitations. For example, in one-on-one interactions, Karen tells students:

I’m really glad you came to talk to me. What you tell me is confidential, meaning that I won’t tell anyone what you say to me, unless you want me to. However, there are a couple of exceptions: if you tell me that you plan to hurt yourself or someone else, the university requires me to report that to ________.

This statement begins by affirming the student’s decision to reach out and that it is appropriate to share very personal information. It then conveys that the instructor will keep the conversation private when possible. By surfacing these policies up front, the student knows the consequences of continuing the conversation and is better able to decide what information to reveal to the instructor.

Necessary Limits on the Involvement of the Instructor: Refusing the Role of the Decision-Maker

After a class session on women and law, a student disclosed to Karen that she was in the middle of a custody battle with her abusive ex-husband. During their subsequent conversation, the student described many of the practical and emotional issues she faced during this process, including her feelings of anger, betrayal, and fear for her daughter’s safety. After each set of concerns, the student repeatedly asked Karen, “What should I do?”

According to the Advocacy-Based Counseling approach, an instructor should listen and provide resources to students—not solve the problem for them. Though this may feel counterintuitive to
instructors, there are several reasons why instructors should not try to “fix” or solve the problems of our students. First, it is important to understand that one critical component of the victimization the student has experienced is the absence (or removal) of personal agency. This may have been done by a specific individual (as in cases of domestic violence, where one person has used coercive tactics to maintain power and control over another person), or on an institutional level (as in cases of racism where student behavior may have been constrained by institutional practices). In either case, part of the empowerment process is helping students learn to exercise their own agency. Thus it is not helpful for someone else to take control over the situation.

Second, instructors do not have a full understanding of the situation; we have, at most, a limited personal narrative. Even if the student claims they do not know what to do, even if they feel overwhelmed, the student, not the instructor, has the capacity to make the right choices. There may be unknown considerations involved in the student’s decision. The fact that they are the most knowledgeable about what choices may be best for them is difficult to reconcile, especially when they make a decision that seems problematic. As long as their choices do not involve actions that would be subject to mandatory reporting, it is best to assume they are drawing on other experiences or knowledge not explicit in the conversation.

Exploring the limits of an instructor’s or another student’s understanding of a situation can also be an important teachable moment. For example, during a discussion of sexual harassment law in Karen’s class, a student talked about how his sister’s employer had made repeated sexual advances towards her. He wanted the sister to quit the job and report her employer to the police. He also wanted Karen’s “expert” opinion to back him up so he would have a stronger argument to make to his sister. Karen used prompts such as, “Why might his sister be reluctant to quit?” and “What might happen if she reported her boss to the police?” to generate discussion and have other students explore the complexity of the situation, to contextualize the sister’s situation with course material on sexual harassment law, and to discuss how to empower women who have experienced sexual harassment.

Third, there are concrete limits to an instructor’s role in this situation; many of the solutions to the problems at hand are outside those limits. As students share their personal narratives, it may become apparent that they have few other personal resources to draw on. Many instructors form good relationships with their students as the course progresses (and it is often these same instructors with whom students feel safe in confiding)—and it may seem to be a “natural” step to help a student who lacks other available resources. However, we believe it is important to limit one’s personal involvement and instead focus on connecting the student with community resources. Students in crisis may be unable or unwilling to respect limits, and well-intentioned instructors may find it difficult to remove themselves from the situation later.

When students ask directly, “What should I do?” turn the question around in a way that is supportive of the student and her situation. In response to the student in the custody battle, Karen asked, “What do you see as your options?” and “What would you like to do?” These responses shift the focus away from the instructor
and back to the student’s perceptions and problem solving skills. If the student replies, “I don’t know what to do,” ask her to take out a pen and paper and write down all of the options she can think of, even the “bad” ones. During this time, it may be important to ask follow-up questions that will elicit the information necessary to determine if suicide or other safety issues are a concern.

Assessing Student Safety: Suicide Risk and Other Dangers

Students in crisis may be in physical or emotional danger from either themselves or others. Children, partners, or others who have relationships with the student may also be at risk. One critical element of any strategy for assisting students in crisis, then, is making an adequate assessment of their safety and the safety of those around them before the student leaves the office (or classroom). If there is any question as to whether or not the student or others are in physical danger, we urge instructors to report their concerns to the appropriate agency. It is better to report, and later discover that it may not have been necessary, than to fail to report when needed.

**ASSESSING SUICIDE RISK**

It is unsurprising that people in crisis may feel that they have no realistic options left open to them. Indeed, resources are limited, and people who access these resources may become further stigmatized. Additionally, many social institutions either blame individuals for their victimization or discourage people from active resistance. The fact that we can rationally understand what might make a student feel that their best option is to kill themselves underscores the need for supportive interventions.

Often students in crisis will discuss feelings of depression, shame, hopelessness, helplessness, anger, anxiety, and/or panic. Each of these feelings is a normal, healthy response to stressful life events, and instructors should not assume suicide risk if any (or all) of these emotions are exhibited by the student. Instead, instructors should become concerned if any of these emotions appears to overwhelm or paralyze the student. One of the best ways to assess emotional state is to attend carefully to language—the choice of words themselves—used by the student to describe what has happened, their responses to those events, and the options that they feel are open to them.

Instructors should become concerned if students talk about the need to escape from the current situation but believe it is inescapable, use consistently fatalistic language, talk about how other loved ones would be better off without them, or use consistently negative language to describe themselves, their future, and the world in general. Expressions of “hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, and guilt” are often associated with suicide ideation (Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan 43). Instructors should also be concerned about the risk of suicide if the student has become socially withdrawn or if she or he talks about (or exhibits symptoms of) increased or excessive drug or alcohol use, changes in weight or appetite, changes in sleep patterns, mood swings, and poor control of impulses. Has the student’s appearance or in-class behavior patterns changed noticeably over the past few weeks? Has the student been missing class more often? Has the quality of the student’s work changed noticeably? Have the themes
present in the student’s work changed? Have other students expressed concerns about the student in question?

When discussing their concerns with students, instructors should always be clear and direct. The exact language used to talk about these concerns, however, should be tailored to the individual student. Some students may be embarrassed or feel shame if the words “suicide” or “kill yourself” are used; broader and “softer” language, such as “I am concerned that you might hurt yourself” can clearly convey the instructor’s concerns while allowing the student enough latitude to feel comfortable being honest. Many students at risk for committing suicide or harming themselves will minimize the severity of the risk, especially if they believe that disclosure of these risks will lead to undesirable outcomes (such as the institution contacting their family, or mandatory therapy, medication, or hospitalization). However, if students have a current plan (have thought about a method that is available to them), have a history that disposes them to suicide (either previous suicidal behavior or the suicide of a friend or family member), and/or few resources available to them (such as friends or counselors aware of the situation who are active and involved in the student’s life), instructors should take immediate action to protect the student.

ASSESSING SAFETY RISK

The student may also be at risk of harm by someone else. As the student is talking, the instructor should keep the following questions in mind. Note that the questions are framed in ways to encourage the student to speak openly; we do not recommend a yes/no construction for these types of questions.

1. Tell me about your living situation. Who else lives with you? In what ways, if any, do you feel unsafe at home?
2. Tell me about your support network. Who would you call in an emergency?
3. How do you feel about your relationship? What safety concerns, if any, do you have about your relationship?
4. In our society, many people find themselves in abusive relationships during their lives. Some of us are not sure if our relationships are actually abusive. Abuse can take many forms, including hitting or shoving, being forced into sex or being consistently yelled at and insulted. In what ways do you think your relationship is/is not abusive?

Students will generally have a good idea of their level of physical danger. Therefore, questions such as “What concerns do you have about your personal safety?” or “What is your gut level feeling about your safety?” will often elicit all the information that the instructor needs.

Again, some students who are in danger may minimize the risks they face. If they describe a situation that clearly seems dangerous (e.g., the student has been physically harmed by someone, or someone has threatened to hurt her, hurt her pets, etc.), but the student does not appear to recognize the danger of the situation, instructors should clearly share these concerns. This should be done with concern, not shock, and should be phrased so the student maintains control over the situation. One way to do this is to tell the student “I’m concerned for your safety (or the safety of their children, etc.). When I hear that your partner is _____, I worry that you may be in a dangerous situation.” If instructors are unsure whether or not the situation warrants reporting, again, it is generally better to report, and
discover that it was unnecessary, than to fail to report and have the student or others at serious risk.

Returning to Everyday Interactions

One of the hardest parts about assisting a student in crisis comes after the conversation ends. As domestic violence advocates, we let the survivor determine whether we have continued involvement in their lives. If we see them on the street, we do not acknowledge them in any way, as it may not be safe or welcome.

As instructors, however, we have an ongoing relationship with our students. It may be difficult for both parties to return to “everyday” interactions after sharing such a personal, emotional experience. Students may feel a number of conflicting emotions: fear that confidentiality has or will be violated, fear that their relationship with the instructor has been permanently altered, relief that the instructor knows why they have had a difficult time in the course.

“Kristin” (not the student’s real name), one of Alesha’s students, told her she felt each of these emotions after disclosing that she was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and, as a coping mechanism, had cut herself repeatedly throughout high school. Kristin’s attendance had been sporadic for the previous few weeks, and she was very concerned that she would get a low grade in the class. After explaining why she “just couldn’t come to class” during the unit on sexual abuse, Kristin “felt better about things, but was really scared that you [Alesha] would freak out or something.”

We have found that we can alleviate some of these fears by taking five minutes at the end of the meeting to discuss with the student what future interactions might look like. In Kristin’s case, Alesha told her that she was glad that Kristin had approached her about her problems with the course material. Alesha then tried to alleviate Kristin’s fears by normalizing her experience without trivializing her problems. Alesha also made it clear that she did not expect Kristin to participate in that part of the course (and that it would not affect her grade). Finally, Alesha reassured Kristin that she would keep their conversation confidential.

Maintaining the confidentiality of the student (when possible) is one of the most important things that instructors can do after assisting a student in crisis. This means that public interactions with the student should revert to their previous state with the understanding that the student may need some accommodations. After Kristin returned to class, she withdrew and did not participate in group conversations for a few class sessions. Alesha afforded her the space she needed but gave Kristin the opportunity to approach her by staying a few extra minutes after each class session. As Kristin realized that the instructor-student relationship had remained unchanged, and that Alesha would not violate confidentiality or, as Kristin put it, “freak out,” Kristin started participating in class more frequently.

Instructors should remember that the student may not want to disclose personal information in the classroom and that it may not be safe for her to do so. Thus, instructors should not ask the student questions about the specific social issue or ask the student to explain the perspective of their “group.” The student will be sensitive to any individual attention when discussing subjects related
to the student’s personal experiences, so instructors should remain aware of students’ body posture and positioning during these in-class discussions. Finally, when in the classroom or in other public settings, instructors should refrain from “checking in” with the student to see how she is doing; let her initiate any further conversations in public areas about her situation. Instructors may want to ask if there is a non-intrusive way to “check in” with the student later—through email, a written note, a telephone call, or another appointment with the instructor. The method chosen by the student, as well as the time, and date, should be carefully noted as the student may be relying on this future follow-up.

If a student does choose to continue these conversations, instructors need to attend to two salient issues. First, students need space to fail. Some students will fail to follow through with their plans or make decisions that undermine their previous actions. It is easy for someone outside of the situation to identify these “errors” (and see how they might be avoided). These “mistakes” are common among people in crisis, and they are an expected part of the healing process.

Second, instructors need to be realistic with their personal limits. The primary responsibility of an instructor is to help students identify appropriate resources, not to provide unlimited time, energy, and assistance. When an instructor gets close to her limits, it is helpful for both instructor and student to discuss these limits constructively, and make other arrangements for the student to access the help they need. It is far more harmful to exceed those limits and become “burned-out” and/or frustrated than to respect those limits and connect the student to other resources.

Conclusions

Teaching about sensitive issues requires feminist instructors to consider carefully the potential impacts that course topics and materials may have on students. Many of the teaching materials used in these types of classes are inherently emotive and can evoke strong reactions from students who read or view them. Students often connect their personal experiences with issues discussed in class, which may lead them to share these experiences with other students in the classroom setting or with the instructor outside of class.

To come to her instructor with a problem similar to the ones discussed in class is a normal response—the student knows that the instructor is knowledgeable about the subject, and because the instructor appears comfortable discussing the subject in class, the student is apt to feel the instructor is a “safe” person (unlikely to react badly when the student reveals her experiences). Furthermore, the student may need to come to an instructor to make alternative arrangements for completing the course or to “explain” their performance on a recent assignment or exam.

It is difficult to strategize in the middle of such a discussion. Since instructors (especially those who teach courses that focus on sensitive social issues) can expect that some students will come to them with a personal crisis, they need to come up with a plan before that situation occurs. Unfortunately, even though both students and institutions expect instructors to handle these situations, few instructors receive formalized training on assisting students in crisis. In addition, relatively few teaching materials address the ways in which instructors can effec-
tively respond to the needs of students in crisis. We have found that the Advocacy-Based Counseling perspective, with its focus on survivor empowerment and active listening techniques, to be useful in all stages of the teaching process—from planning course content to handling stressful situations and/or student crises that arise both during and after class. By using the ABC perspective to strategize appropriate responses and set clear limits, instructors can best help students within the constraints of the teacher-student relationship. Administrators can also use the ABC perspective to plan responses and provide resources, information, and training in ABC techniques to ensure that the needs of their students (and instructors) are met.

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