

TEACHING ABOUT HATE CRIMES TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

The addition of special interest classes to the criminal justice curriculum has allowed criminal justice professors to reach a much wider audience than was previously possible. This paper explores the teaching methods used to teach a criminal justice course on hate crimes using either traditional face- to- face instructional methods or on-line instruction using a Blackboard format. Student participation and integrity issues are explored.

Introduction:

The teaching of a controversial subject such as hate crimes provides several interesting challenges to the criminal justice instructor. For example: unless it is a general education class, such as Introduction to Criminal Justice, criminal justice professors generally only have criminal justice majors in their classes. The addition of special interest classes to the criminal justice curriculum has allowed criminal justice professors to reach a much wider audience than was previously possible. In addition to the traditional criminal justice students, these special interest classes attract a wide and diverse interest in non-criminal justice majors who have an interest in the subject matter being taught in this one particular area. Criminal justice classes in hate crimes often attract students from a diverse disciplinary body of students (i.e. Anthropology, African American/Minority Studies, Education, Gender Studies, History, Journalism, Political Science, Psychology, Religion, Social Justice, Social Work, Sociology, etc.). Members of particular groups who are affected by hate crimes often enroll to seek information about what motivates those who commit these types of crimes. The challenges of teaching a hate crime course were defined by Grestenfeld (2004) as:

- * Deciding on the scope of the class
- * Finding appropriate texts
- * Dealing with students' differing academic backgrounds
- * Encouraging class discussion
- * Finding assignments and activities

According to Payne and Gainey (2000) Hate Crime is a controversial subject that must be dealt with by the professor acting as a facilitator to guide the students through the various ways that the issues can be approached. It is important for the student to understand the why, as well as the what in the study of this subject. This article will focus on hate crime classes as developed and taught at the University of Mississippi and the University of Central Missouri.

Teaching an Abnormal World-View:

Instructors of this type of criminal justice course are often asked the question: "Why do they hate us?" It is very hard to explain the rationale behind an irrational action or belief. Hate groups often have very different or alternative views of: history, religion and politics. It is essential for the student to be able to grasp these views so that they may gain an understanding of why the haters believe and act the way they do.

Deciding on the Scope of the Class:

Although hate crimes occur world-wide, the authors have found it expedient to limit the discussion in this class to those hate crimes that have occurred in the United States. Narrowing that focus further, the classes focus on four particular motives for these hate crime: racism, homophobia, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitism. By identifying the primary motives for the hate crime the students are better able to grasp the process of the criminal investigation of the hate crime. In order to understand the investigation process, the authors have adopted the FBI's Schafer and Navarro's Seven-Stage Hate Model which requires the student to examine each criminal case being studied as follows:

- * Group Gathers
- * Group Defines Itself
- * Disparages Target
- * Taunts Target
- * Attacks Target Without Weapons
- * Attacks Target With Weapons
- * Destroys Target (Schafer & Navarro, 2003)

The hate crimes class examines the operations, beliefs, and crimes of various domestic hate and extremist groups including:

- * American Nazi Party
- * Aryan Nations
- * Black Separatist Groups
- * Ku Klux Klan
- * National Alliance
- * National Socialist Movement
- * Skinheads

Finding Appropriate Texts:

As a pedagogical concept, the selection of a text for any class is an important

decision. This is especially in a hate crimes class due to the diversity of the student body and the sensitivity in the subject matter. The instructor should select a text that covers the subject from a comprehensive, yet readable viewpoint that meets the overall objectives of the course (Dyck & Pemberton, 2002; Morris, 1977). There are several texts available to choose from. The University of Mississippi has adopted Hate Crime and Extremist Gangs (Knox & Etter, 2008). The University of Central Missouri has adopted Hate and Bias Crime: A reader (Perry, 2003).

Dealing With Students from Differing Academic Backgrounds:

Because of the controversial subject matter, a criminal justice course on hate crimes draws a wide variety of students. Many of these students are not from a criminal justice background and the students taking this course are taking the course for a multitude of reasons. They may be members of or connected with members of a minority racial, religious, or sexual group, or may be just interested in the subject. They could also be just criminal justice students looking for an elective and this was the only class open (although it has been the experience of the authors that these classes fill up quickly). All are welcome.

However, this presents the instructor with some interesting challenges. Some students who are not criminal justice majors may not be familiar with basic criminal justice concepts that were taught in Introduction to Criminal Justice and other Criminal Justice courses. Therefore the instructor has to ensure that when he or she is describing a case study or showing how a hate crimes case is investigated, it is essential that not only the facts of the case, but also the basics of investigations are covered as well. For example, students may or may not know that shouting the infamous N-word is not a crime (foolish, ignorant, hateful, but protected speech under the 1st amendment of the United States Constitution). However, shouting the same word in another context (i.e. N-word I'm going to kill you!) could be a crime (i.e. terroristic threats) under certain circumstances. It is necessary to include a short refresher section of the elements of a crime, so that all students gain a better understanding of the subject. This includes legality vs. politically incorrect, what is needed to prosecute the criminal (motive, method, opportunity), and basic investigatory techniques to solve the crime (identifying suspects, evidence, witnesses, etc.)

Another challenge for the instructor is the possibility that a member of one of the hate groups being studied decides to take the course for general interest, "equal time," or to present their views. For example, while one of the authors was presenting a class on the Ku Klux Klan at a small university in Arkansas, after the power point presentation, one of the students asked to revisit a slide of a cross burning (which he then studied intently). When the instructor asked if the student had ever seen an actual cross burning, the student replied that he indeed had and just wanted to see if anybody he knew was present. Further inquiry revealed that he was a member of a local KKK group. When asked what he thought about the presentation, he replied that it was accurate for the most part. At that time he was asked what was different in his KKK group and he made a few minor points, then the class continued peacefully.

Encouraging Class Discussion:

Classroom discussions allow the students to form and express their ideas about a subject. This helps them take ownership of the course and engage in self-directed learning. The easiest approach to introducing students to this concept is to have

them introduce themselves to the class. This can be done in several ways. In the traditional face-to-face classes, many instructors have a student tell a fellow student about themselves and then they introduce each other. Others have the students introduce themselves in an online discussion board. This works well for the large traditional face-to-face classes and is the only option in an on-line class. Another benefit to using an on-line discussion board to introduce each student is that many students are shy and will respond more openly in this type of format. While introducing themselves to the class, the students are often asked to constructively state what they expect to learn in the class. This feedback gives the instructor a good idea of not only who their students are, but more importantly what they expect or are interested in learning from the class (Bourner, Martin, & Race, 1993).

Teaching students by asking probing questions that cause them to reflect and think and thus share their thoughts with all present is the classic Socratic method of instruction that is a staple in many areas of didactic instruction, especially in law schools. It is a useful method in teaching critical thinking skills to students (Ball & Brewer, 1996). The focus has to remain on the issues and keeping the discussion civil, no matter what the view (Payne & Gainey, 2000). One teaching tactic that seems to work is to make the discussion question extra credit; the students feel free to express their opinions on the issue offered for discussion. Many instructors like to make their discussion questions on-line items so that students who normally would never participate in a classroom discussion will open up and participate in the discussion. This allows the many students who are members of a minority ethnic, sexual orientation, or religious group to self-identify in these discussions. One question that is useful in determining the scope of the problem is: Have you or anyone you know ever been the victim of a hate crime? The responses are interesting. From the authors' experiences, most students have not been involved in a hate crime directly. However, some have and they are often willing to share their stories. Many others know of someone who has been the victim of a hate crime. This raises student awareness of the scope of the problem and aids their personal understanding or empathy.

The questions selected for the course should stimulate critical thinking. For example: What is the difference between discrimination and a hate crime? The students reply with their views on the subject. Then the instructor replies with the legal definitions and elements that make up each of the two. (i.e. both are illegal, civil prosecution v. criminal prosecution, etc.). This maintains a dialogue with the students in which learning takes place.

Other questions will be more controversial. Such as: "Do you think the debate on homosexual marriages has increased the chances of homosexuals being targets of a hate crime?" This type of question opens an entirely new discussion fraught with civil liberties, political, and religious implications. All minority groups are not united on their view of this issue. The discussion becomes quite interesting. The instructor should not function as an advocate for any side, but act as a moderator for the discussion providing facts (FBI UCR Hate Crime Statistics, etc.) and keeping the discussion civil (Cannon & Dirks-Linhorst, 2006).

Finding Assignments and Activities:

In addition to reading the assigned texts, the authors use case studies of four different murders with four different motives to show students how hate crimes occur. Each of the cases are unique and presented to the students using the Schafer

and Navarro's Seven-Stage Hate Model showing how each stage of the crime was accomplished. The cases studied are:

- * Homophobia: The Murder of Matthew Shepard
- * Racism: The Murder of James Byrd
- * Anti-Semitism: The Murder of Alan Berg
- * Anti-Immigrant: The Murder of Mulugeta Seraw

In addition there are four other case studies. Each of the case study murders are about a famous civil rights case that is not assigned in the course text. The students are required to complete four structured essays which require them to examine the four different murders and answer a series of questions in their answers about the murders. The questions contained in the structured essays require the students to research the subject and respond. For example, in responding to the essay about the murder of Emmett Till, a student (who was a member of the same minority group as the victim) stated she had never even heard of this case and could not believe how cruelly a 14 year old boy had been treated. It was a real eye opener for her. This is exactly what the essays are intended to do. They are to show the students the bigotry, cruelty, violence and hatred that permeated the civil rights era. The required cases from the civil rights era that essays are required on are:

- * The murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- * The murder of Emmett Till
- * The murder of Medgar Evers
- * The 16th St Baptist Church Bombing

Critical thinking skills are stimulated by requiring the students to complete a research project on a subject that deals with hate crimes. At the University of Central Missouri, the hate crimes class is presented in an on-line format and the research project results in an individual term paper developed by the student according to structured guidelines. At the University of Mississippi the hate crimes class is presented in the traditional face-to-face format. The research project is a group project. Each student group is assigned to produce a written term paper and give a research Power Point presentation. The students are not only graded on the paper and presentation, but are also required to complete both a self-assessment and a confidential peer assessment. Group projects are a type of experiential learning that enhances the learning experience for the members participating in the group by cooperative inquiry into a problem (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010).

Traditional Face to Face Instruction vs. On-Line Instructional Formats:

Criminal justice classes are presented in a variety of formats in colleges and universities in the United States. The most common format is the traditional face-to-face instructional format in which students are seated in a traditional college classroom and taught directly by the professor. The students attend class at a prescribed time for a pre-determined amount of instruction. Experiments with evening classes, weekend classes, hybrid, on-line, and the use of regional or satellite campuses are efforts by college administrators to make education accessible to a wider audience. Criminal Justice departments have participated in these efforts. The Hate Crime classes at the University of Mississippi are taught in a face-to-face format on both the main and at its two regional campuses.

The far flung nature of the criminal justice community and the need of criminal justice theorists and practitioners for advanced or continuing criminal justice education have resulted in many criminal justice programs developing distance educa-

tional formats (Cheurprakobkit, 2000). These educational formats have developed from correspondence courses in the 19th century, to inter-active instructional television, to on-line learning via internet. Perhaps out of necessity, the criminal justice faculties, as a group, have embraced the concepts of distance education much faster than in some other academic disciplines (Smith, Bradley, & Benscoter, 1999). The Hate Crime classes at the University of Central Missouri are taught in an on-line format via the internet whereas the hate crimes class at the University of Mississippi has been taught traditionally, hybrid, and in the on-line format.

Bernet and Iijima-Hall (2000) noted that when developing a criminal justice class for an on-line format instructors must face several challenges. The first of these is becoming competent in the use of the computer and the academic software needed to teach the course. There are several academic internet course platforms (Angel, Blackboard, WebCT, etc.) and the instructor must at least develop a working knowledge of the platform that their university is using.

The second need is to develop the course and course content. Unlike a face-to-face course where the students attend classes at a set time for a set time period. Many on-line students attend classes around their work schedules and work at their own pace. Because of this most of the instructor's work in developing and running an on-line course is done before the class opens for the first time, rather than on a week-by-week basis as is done in the many face-to-face classes. On-line students like to skip ahead and look at things that interest them. The whole class needs to be ready on day one.

The third need is to determine the scope of the course. What is to be learned by the student? In most criminal justice college level courses, the content of the face-to-face and the on-line courses is basically the same. Therefore the only difference is the technology and how the course is presented by the instructor. The course still has assignments and deadlines. Some courses even have assigned times to meet and mandatory check in times for on-line chats with discussion groups.

When designing an on-line criminal justice course, instructors must realize that in an on-line course you are dealing with distance learning and the students are in a virtual classroom. Thus they must be able to actually see what the instructor is talking about. The teaching techniques of B.F. Skinner (1954) using step-by-step, criterion-based instruction have proved useful in this educational format. Breaking the lessons into smaller visual problem based learning modules to build competencies seems to work well in this format and is popular with students (Sims, 2006).

While developing their presentations instructors, being aware that internet classes are designed for the visual learner must make sure their presentations have illustrations to bolster their main points. They must use fonts large enough to be easily read. The instructors should also use PDF format for larger written documents such as articles. This will assist the students in being able to access, understand, and assimilate the instructional materials being offered.

Summary:

Hate crimes is a controversial topic that is of interest to a wide variety of students. As discussed, students take this class for many different reasons. This type of special topics class allows the criminal justice professor to reach a wider audience than is normally found among criminal justice majors. By constructing a well thought out course of instruction, an interesting and meaningful interaction can be achieved with students on the most controversial subjects.

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