Maintaining Safety while Teaching about Traumatic Current Events such as Hurricane Katrina

Kathy Harowski, PhD, LP
October 18, 2005

Recent public events and ongoing media coverage of their impact and aftermath are shared by all of us as citizens and often become current events relevant for discussion in college classes. Since the events of 911, there has been a great deal of research on college student’s exposure to normative traumatic events and how that might interact with class materials and presentations with trauma based content. Attendees will learn how other faculty have thought through these issues in terms of setting up boundaries to help students feel safe as well as rules for discussion should conflict emerge from strong opinion or feelings about these events. Bring examples from your classes as we will discuss situations many of us have faced and share our responses.

“In teaching about trauma it is important to acknowledge that in such teaching students don’t merely discover the traumatic experience of the other they confront and formulate narratives of their own experience”    Zuk and Wetmore, 1993, pg 21

Placing this topic in context:  From Charles Figley (1988) to current events (2005)

The goal for faculty entering into a consideration of this issue would be making sure that the emotional impact of certain topics and events is not forgotten and also to consider how the information is delivered- how to approach the goal of safety through managing the classroom emotional level/atmosphere as well as the content provided and how the content is delivered.

Several questions to start your thinking:

- Am I comfortable when certain personal information is being disclosed? What issues might it tap for me or from my own experience?

- Am I ready for the emotional level to rise in the classroom when students disclose their personal experiences such as sexual assault, suicide attempt, recent significant loss or exposure to a traumatic event? Do I have a plan or script that I can fall back on for my initial response?

- Am I ready to handle these situations as they emerge or tempted to put them aside by trying to hold them off until later?
Suggestions for managing potentially traumatic material and classroom disclosure:

- Start by considering your goals and motivations for teaching the material.
- McCammon (1999) encourages establishing an accepting, but not confessional tone for the class. This incorporates announcing the topic and establishing boundaries for how to discuss.
- Select your lecture examples carefully and respectfully in terms of content and the level of emotional intensity that will be invoked.
- Include information on counseling and support resources available to students.
- Hot topics handout and student counseling center brochure

If a student discloses:

- Acknowledge their disclosure and relate it to the lesson.
- Keep discussion off the individual student and steer the class towards an empathic and constructive discussion of the issue.
- If you are talking about issues with a high probability of overlap with the people in the room such as an event in your own community, a current event or sexual assault, include information about treatment options and recovery over time.

Examples of tip sheets provided

[www.Apa.org](http://www.Apa.org)
[www.NCPTSD.va.gov](http://www.NCPTSD.va.gov)