

Visualizing evil: Avoiding trauma when teaching about political violence

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The problem

From Ukraine, through Syria, and back towards the war in Iraq, images and videos of horrific political violence have circulated globally. Filmed by perpetrators, victims, and observers of, the world has witnessed an unprecedented flood in visual artifacts depicting acts of political evil. At a societal level, the most common response to this development has been attempts to censor the distribution of such imagery (Austin 2022).

At the same time, many researchers and civil society activists stress the importance of the availability of this imagery for understanding the 'real-world' dynamics of political violence and potentially providing new insights into its prevention (Collins 2007, Bramsen 2020). Additionally, imagery of this kind can be extremely useful in a classroom setting where the goal is to teach about the reality of political violence beyond the distortions of its representation in mainstream media (Hollywood films, news reports, etc.). In this study, I therefore explore how courses about political violence can draw on such imagery without the risk of inducing (secondary) trauma on students, for various possible reasons.

The study connects to ongoing debates about student welfare in classroom settings. Those debates have usually focused on how we can teach controversial material, histories of injustice, or cognate phenomena that may disturb students at an individual and collective level. Often, these discussions have been controversial, cutting into political debates about the nature of the university, with some opposing the use of trigger-warnings or the idea of safe-spaces in the classroom. However, the question here is more specific, given the nature of the material goes beyond discussing controversial ideas into the exposure of students to graphic representations of violence. This connects the study to a broader literature on the risks posed by secondary trauma in multiple social settings (Cless and Goff 2017; Harrison, et al 2020).

The approach: a student-led investigation

This study took place in the class *Global Violence and Political Evil*, a 15 ECTS BA/MA-level elective course in political science focused on understanding how political violence spreads across time and space. The course integrates the close-reading of ethnographic texts that describe extreme violence, the screening of documentary films in which perpetrators of violence describe their actions, as well as secondary visual material depicting political violence. The course has an enrolment of 45 students and is structured (as close as is possible) in a seminar-based format in which this material is collectively discussed.

In order to explore the topic of this project, I took a student-led approach in which those completing the class became co-producers of a strategy in which to manage risks of secondary trauma throughout the class. The reasoning here is threefold. First, the goal was to give students the agency to manage (in a controlled setting) their own exposure to violent material. Second, taking such a student-led approach would also allow me to test the common proposition that students prefer to avoid being exposed to disturbing material. Third, this approach is appropriate given the diversity of the student body. No one class will contain students with the same prior experiences that must be taken into account when studying political violence in this way.

References:

Austin, Jonathan Luke. 2022. "Seeing All Evil: The Global Cruelty of Digital Visibility." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2 (2).
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Cless, Jessica D., and Briana S. Nelson Goff. 2017. "Teaching Trauma." *Advances in Social Work* 18 (1).
Collins, Randall. 2007. *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Harrison, Neil et al. 2020. "Risky Teaching." *Teaching in Higher Education*.
Pinar Alakoc, Burcu. 2019. "Terror in the Classroom" *Journal of Political Science Education* 15 (2): 218-36.

The approach taken here is therefore both a speculative empirical inquiry into the needs of students and a possible model to be applied in other classes with distinct student bodies.

In the first class, students were asked to consider 1) the challenges they foresaw in studying material of this kind, 2) the approaches or solutions to those challenges they would best like to take when studying this material. This included asking for specific strategies they might like me to employ as the instructor, as well as particular concerns they had about engaging with material of this kind. These strategies were then put into practice during my teaching. Several further rounds of hybrid-format feedback were thereafter solicited through anonymous survey tools, in which students could update me on their worries, other strategies they might like to deploy, and so on. I also conducted one-on-one discussions with eight students who took part in the class that gave me further insights.

Challenges

The main challenges identified by the students were as follows:

1. Personal experiences of violence among students and the risk of re-traumatization based on class material;
2. The differing positionalities of students in relation to depictions of violence (from the same/adjacent region, religion, etc.);
3. The emotional and affective experience of witnessing or reading about extreme acts of violence;
4. The presence of racist, misogynistic, and other discriminatory discourses within violent material;

Solutions

The four main solutions identified by the students were as follows:

- Providing warnings about the nature of graphic content that will be seen/discussed in as detailed a manner as is possible (i.e. not simply 'the material will be disturbing'). Warnings should be given:
 - In the class prior to the class in which the material will be discussed (allowing students to contact me in advance, skip that session if necessary etc.);
 - During the class in which the material is discussed, at the beginning of the class and immediately prior to the material being discussed.
- Allowing students to make their own judgements about whether or not they wish to view such material (based on above descriptions) and not penalizing them for deciding against doing so;
- Structuring the class such that small-group discussions follow engagement with such material to allow students to provide mutual support away from the entirety of the class and/or myself as the teacher;



Israeli soldiers arrest a protestor in the city of Hebron. Credit: Jonathan Luke

Results

I began implementing the students' suggested strategies immediately. To judge their efficacy, students were asked to fill-out anonymous survey forms detailing how helpful they thought these strategies were, whether they were having any issues with the material, and so on. The following are the key results from that qualitative data, with selected representative comments from students:

- In the first class, approximately 30% of the students had *initial* concerns about the class material:
 - "I'm a bit uncomfortable. Because of things that have happened to me before, I'm worried some of the material might remind me of past experiences. On the other hand, that's also part of the reason I take this class."
- All student respondents appreciated the presence of warnings throughout the class, particularly pre-class warnings:
 - "The warnings are helpful to prepare us for the things we see or talk about. That's most important. We see lots of violent things in other places anyway but having some time to prepare psychologically is really good."
- Small-group discussions were considered especially helpful in addition to warnings, for allowing post-hoc reflection:
 - "I think that being able to chat together in exercises after going through disturbing material was great. It gave some time and space to breathe and focus-away from these things."

In addition, while some students asked if they could 'skip' certain material in the class, this occurred only rarely, and usually with requests for alternative (textual) material to 'catch-up' on what had been/might be missed.

Conclusions

In public rhetoric, it is sometimes assumed that including 'trigger-warnings' or explicit concerns over student-well being in relation to disturbing material risks inhibiting classroom discussion and the exposure of students to the 'real-world.' Against such assumptions, this study affirms that a student-led approach to classroom well-being *increases* the capacity of students to engage with controversial material and the real-world of political violence. In particular, the following key findings emerged:

- Students often have substantive prior experience of engaging with disturbing material due to their regular everyday exposure to such material (on social media, etc.);
- This allows for the 'co-production' of a classroom environment conducive to their needs and meeting learning goals;
- Student-led recommendations for how to best structure classes of this nature correlate closely with recommendations in the pedagogical literature (Pinar Alakoc 2019);
- No student in this small experiment withdrew from engaging with this material entirely. In fact, only on a few occasions did students ask to be exempt from watching parts of certain documentary films;
- Students generally appreciate the acknowledgement of concerns for their well-being in this manner and it appears to allow them to engage to *an increased* degree with such material than would otherwise be the case.

Based on the above findings, my general impression is that while specific strategies are very important for ensuring student well-being, what is most crucial is the overall classroom atmosphere and ethos developed to discuss material of this kind. A supportive environment which acknowledges students' own capacity to make judgements about their own well-being is crucial to mitigating risks in a class of this kind.