

## Teaching a General Education Course on Hate Crimes: Challenges and Solutions

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Almost ten years ago, I began teaching a course on hate crimes. This course was originally created as an upper division elective for undergraduate Criminal Justice majors. In the years since, the course has been adapted slightly so that it now serves to satisfy our General Education “Multicultural” requirement. The course is a popular one—in the fall of 2003, I had 62 students—and one I enjoy teaching. However, teaching this course has also presented several challenges. In this paper, I describe some of the challenges I have faced, as well as the approaches I have taken to meeting these challenges. I also briefly discuss what I believe are some of the primary benefits of offering this class.

### II. CHALLENGE ONE: DECIDING ON THE SCOPE OF THE CLASS

My hate crimes course was originally created as a criminal justice elective. From its inception, however, I took a multidisciplinary approach. In part, this reflects my own academic background (which is in law and social psychology), and, in part, it reflects the diverse nature of criminal justice itself. Moreover, I strongly believe that hate crimes cannot be studied adequately without the inclusion of materials from many fields.

When the course became a G.E. class, it became even more important that it cover materials from a variety of disciplines. Not only did I want to encompass the breadth of the subject of hate crimes, but also I wanted to make the course as relevant as possible to students with a wide range of interests, majors, and career goals.

My hate crimes course now incorporates perspectives and materials from a variety of disciplines, including criminal justice, law, psychology, sociology, economics, political science, history, biology, anthropology, and gender studies, among others. Because a significant number of my students intend to become teachers, I also make sure to introduce them to things such as the *Healing the Hate* curriculum (McLaughlin and Brilliant 1997) and *A Teacher's*

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*Guide to the Holocaust* (<http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/Holocaust/>). We discuss not just hate crimes per se, but also related topics such as, for example, the concept of race, the effects of stereotypes and prejudice, and causes of homophobia.

I have found that the benefits of a multidisciplinary approach are many. Such an approach does the broad subject of hate crimes much better justice than a narrower approach would. Students find the class more engaging when it includes materials from their own disciplines, and they also tend to be more comfortable participating in class discussions. A side benefit is that students are exposed to information from fields that are new to them, and sometimes this sparks a new interest for them. For example, several years ago I had a psychology major in this class who found he enjoyed both the criminal justice and law components. He added a minor in criminal justice, and eventually went on to law school, where he has since earned both a J.D. and an LL.M.

### III. CHALLENGE TWO: FINDING APPROPRIATE TEXTS

When I started teaching this class, there were no appropriate textbooks, and there was relatively little scholarship available on the topic. For several years, I compiled a packet of readings taken primarily from journal articles and court decisions. Not only was this time-consuming for me and unwieldy for both me and the students, but it didn't offer the type of synthesis of information that a textbook would.

Eventually, texts on hate crimes started to appear. Although some of them were very good, none quite suited my needs. For example, Levin and McDevitt's (1993) book was engaging for students to read, but contained neither the depth nor breadth of information I was looking for. Perry's (2001) book offers an excellent sociological perspective, but again doesn't address all of my areas of concern. Other good books that lack the dimensions I was seeking or that are inappropriate for this particular group of students include those written by Jacobs and Potter (1998), Lawrence (1999), Herek and Berrill (1992), and Hamm (1994). For several years, I chose one or another of these books, but supplemented very heavily with other readings. Unfortunately, the already-arduous task of assembling a reader gradually became even more difficult as the quantity of scholarly work on hate crime continued to grow.

Having been granted a sabbatical in the fall of 2002, I finally took what I felt was the inevitable step of writing a hate crimes textbook myself (Gerstenfeld 2004). I also co-edited an accompanying anthology (Gerstenfeld and Grant 2004).<sup>1</sup> Obviously, in my own books I was able to adopt the scholarly, broad approach to hate crimes that I wanted. I believe that my books fill a need, and I hope that others find them useful as well. However, I suspect that many instructors who adopt them will still want to supplement to some degree with materials that are pertinent to their own interests, or that are too recent to have been included in my books.

#### IV. CHALLENGE THREE: DEALING WITH STUDENTS' DIFFERING ACADEMIC BACKGROUNDS

Because this course fulfills a General Education requirement, the students have a variety of majors. A large portion are generally criminal justice students, but the rest may be majoring in anything from business to physical education. This presents a particular challenge because many of the students in the class have had no previous background in some of the fields we cover in the class. Most of the non-CJ students, for example, know little about criminal law concepts such as mens rea and motive, and few of the non-CJ students have ever read a court decision before. Only the psychology majors are generally familiar with judgment heuristics, another topic we discuss.

This means that whenever I introduce a new subject, I have to present a certain amount of background material so that it will be understandable to everyone. Obviously, though, I don't want to spend too much time on the background material, as we already have ample ground to cover on the primary subject.

I deal with this dilemma in a number of ways. First, I encourage students to create study groups that are composed of students with a variety of majors. Second, when I wrote the text I attempted to present all the necessary background information in terms that were as clear and simple as possible. Third, I give the students leads on where they can obtain additional information, should they so desire. Fourth, I present materials from enough different fields that all students understand at least some of it. Fifth, I supplement the main text with more in-depth readings on a number of subjects. This allows students with some fluency in a particular subject area to study some topics in greater detail. And finally, I encourage any student who feels confused to meet with me after class or during my office hours, or to email me. These tactics seem to work. Students from all majors do equally well in the class, and when I have informally asked students whether they felt they were able to adequately understand all the information, they have said yes.

#### V. CHALLENGE FOUR: ENCOURAGING CLASS DISCUSSION

In any course on hate crimes, the discussion will turn many times to topics that are sensitive, and that most students are not used to discussing openly in class. When a group of students is of diverse ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations, individuals might feel especially uncomfortable voicing their thoughts in class. This effect is multiplied when the class has a large number of students.

An exercise we do on the first day of class helps alleviate this problem. The class generates a list of stereotypes about several different groups (women, African Americans, Latinos, etc.). All students list the stereotypes on a piece of

paper (without their name on it), which they then give to me. I make posters of these, and hang the posters on the walls along with those created by previous classes. I then read each and every stereotype out loud. This exercise is pedagogically useful when we discuss stereotypes, but it also serves as an ice-breaker. I find that students feel more comfortable discussing things once they are out in the open.

I use other techniques to encourage discussion as well. One particularly effective method is the frequent use of small groups for discussions and activities. Because some students still feel uncomfortable speaking in class, I also give frequent journal assignments. Student comments in the journals are often interesting and insightful; they sometimes recount the students' own experiences (e.g., one student this fall had a grandfather who was lynched; another student told about being ostracized because of her sexual orientation) and provide me with ideas for future discussions.

A related issue that sometimes arises is the need to keep discussions open and honest while being respectful of all. In my class, this usually becomes most problematic when we discuss gay and lesbian victims of hate crimes. Students who had been proudly proclaiming their lack of bigotry all semester will express fairly homophobic thoughts. I do not want to alienate anyone, but I certainly cannot let these expressions go unchallenged. Without personally belittling anyone, I do try to help these students question the sources of their feelings, and I also try to help them understand how such thoughts can provide an environment that nurtures hate crimes. I do not know that I have "cured" anyone of bias, but I do believe I have at least made many students think about it. I also purposely save this topic for nearly the end of the term, when we are all quite a bit more comfortable with one another.

## VI. CHALLENGE FIVE: FINDING ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

Throughout the semester, I use a variety of assignments and activities to pique student interest and to consider topics in novel ways. Some of these are internet-based. For example, this last fall several students told me that the most enlightening experience for them was when I required them to take measure of their own biases with a couple of the Implicit Association Tests (available at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research/> and [http://www.tolerance.org/hidden\\_bias/](http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/)). Some years, I have also had the students create web pages of their own (<http://cjwww.csustan.edu/hatecrimes/>).

Other exercises take place in class. One of my favorites is Barnga (Thiagarajan and Steinwachs 1990), a simple card game that simulates intercultural communication problems. On the last day of class, we have a potluck to which students bring dishes representative of some part of their own family or ethnic history.

Some of the exercises and assignments I use have been adapted from ideas

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from the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project (<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/>); some have come from other organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (<http://www.adl.org>); some were inspired by exercises in social psychology texts; and others I have devised myself. I am always happy to share ideas with others, and some of my ideas are in my textbook as well.

I also use various audiovisual materials, including Powerpoint presentations. There are many, many relevant videos available. Sound clips can be useful as well. This last semester, for instance, I played a few short selections of white power music when we discussed extremist groups, Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" when we discussed lynchings, and some Turkish-German rap when we discussed ethnic conflict in modern Germany. I have an audiotape of an interview a student conducted with a local Klan leader several years ago, and I often play part of that as well.

In general, I find that these activities make the class more interesting and help students understand and remember the material better. They can have additional benefits as well. Several students have found *Banga* so interesting that they have later used the game themselves with groups to which they belong, such as fraternities and sororities.

## VI. BENEFITS OF THIS COURSE

While this course does present a number of challenges, I believe that the benefits to the students and to me are worth it. It is one of my favorite classes to teach, and my students consistently tell me that they have enjoyed it and learned a great deal.

Students in this class learn about hate crimes, a topic about which they were previously mostly either uninformed or misinformed. But they also learn about many related topics, such as the causes and effects of prejudice, the Holocaust, the history and biology of the concept of race, the history of government-sanctioned racism in the United States, current ethnic conflicts abroad, and so on. They are exposed to ideas from many disciplines that are new to them. They get the opportunity to recognize and explore their own biases. They meet students in other majors and get to hear those other students' perspectives. And they gain experience working in small groups.

Since most of my other classes consist almost entirely of criminal justice majors or minors, this class allows me to meet new students and to hear their thoughts. The course forces me to devise creative ways of meeting challenges and interesting ways to introduce new material. Because the field of hate crimes is rapidly changing, and because the scope of my course is broad, I can constantly tinker with the class. I get to teach subjects that I don't have the chance to discuss in my other classes. I am never bored with it.

In sum, although teaching this course entails many challenges, I believe it

is well worth it. I would encourage others to consider teaching such a course as well.

#### NOTES

1. Perry's (2003) reader was published at almost the same time as the one I co-edited. I believe either reader might be appropriate as a primary text or as a supplement.

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