How J-School Professors Should Talk About Sexual Harassment, Abuse in Class | Journalism

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Dr. Candi Carter Olson discusses theories about why people follow and believe various media sources in Media Smarts, a media literacy class that addresses issues related to fact checking, bias, and all kinds of diversity, including, race, gender, class and sexuality. (Photo: Pono Suganuma, senior journalism and communication major at Utah State University)

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The recent revelations about powerful men who have used their authority to abuse women and other men have drawn attention yet again to sexual violence and harassment.

Avoiding these issues is not an option for us right now. We are facing an environment where new revelations of men in our society sexually harassing or assaulting women, and sometimes men, seem like a daily occurrence. In fact, Time magazine named the “silence breakers” of the #meToo hashtag movement as persons of the year. As journalism professors who teach classes on gender in the media, we have been confronting these issues for years. We think it’s time that other professors get on board by addressing these topics in their classes as well.

Anticipating Challenging Student Questions

It’s guaranteed that sexual harassment and assault will come up in our media classes because they’re everywhere in the media we are studying. So, as experienced teachers on these topics, we’ve compiled a list of questions that we’ve heard from students when discussing media and intersectionality (the concept that that race, gender, class, sexuality and other social categories intertwine and contribute to systems of discrimination and oppression).

1. Why don’t we use victim/survivor names in news stories, but we use the accused perpetrator’s name?
2. Don’t a lot of women lie about being raped or assaulted?
3. I don’t even know what feminists want. Aren’t they just causing problems because they hate men?
4. What about men? Aren’t men victims too?
5. Why are we even talking about this in the media? This seems like a distraction from real issues.
6. Why don’t women who are abused just leave their abuser?
7. Why don’t women who are harassed in the workplace report it when it happens?
8. Why do women provoke men into abusing them? (Yes, this actually was asked in one of our classes.)

Student questions like these can be loaded and difficult to discuss in class. You may need to redirect with, “I need to think about that and get back to you later,” or, “That’s not an appropriate topic for class conversation, but I’ll be happy to work through it with you during office hours.” Otherwise, class can degenerate into a shouting match. However, there are important experiences and perspectives that need to be kept in mind if questions like these are raised.
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The Why Behind Challenging Classroom Discussions

It’s important to remember that 1 in 4 of our students is a survivor of sexual assault and/or sexual violence. That’s an epidemic. Every conversation we have in our classroom affects those students in intimate, sometimes empowering, sometimes triggering, ways.

We should keep in mind that general discussions of these topics may remind students of their own experiences, which they may never have discussed with anyone. Even as there have been students who have never talked about their experiences, other students have come to us with their stories, asking for help. Because these topics are intimate and emotional, we also have witnessed students run out of classrooms after hearing content that spurred memories.

In one class, a student stood up and described to her classmates the unwanted grabbing and touching she endured in her job as a restaurant server. She’d finally had enough.

“This is my body, and it’s not anyone else’s property,” she said. “No one has the right to touch my body.”

In another class, one student confided early in the semester that she was a survivor and was going through the legal system, a brutal process. It forces survivors to be under scrutiny for every choice they’ve ever made, from taking a drink to kissing someone before saying that she didn’t want to go any further. This woman, however, chose to allow the media to report her name, a brave decision that exposed her to even further scrutiny.
Even though she struggled with the public scrutiny and the emotional stress that it caused, she thought it was important to say that she was not ashamed.

It’s essential that we discuss and confront these issues in the classroom. Students may have never had any other kind of forum to address them. Young women are now discussing openly what large percentages of women in the workplace have faced for decades. And they are standing up for themselves.

It’s important to note that it’s not just straight women who are survivors. Our male students, transgender students, and LGBTQ students are all confronting these issues too, and they deserve our understanding and sensitivity as well.

Another point to make is that sexual harassment, abuse, and violence are not about sex; they are about power.

**Entering into the #metoo Conversation with Students**

Now that we have acknowledged that it is part of our responsibility to facilitate these challenging discussions, how do we broach these subjects in the classroom?

- First, remember that so-called “trigger warnings” are not weakness. Trigger warnings are an important way to tell students that you care and that the content may be difficult, but you’re willing to fight through it with them. As professors, we also employ trigger warnings to let students know that we care about them, and if they need to miss the class for their mental health, then they can make that decision. We have seen students relapse into eating disorders, PTSD and other mental health issues because they’ve chosen to tackle material that brought back horrendous memories. We are sad to say that in the past we have found more than one sobbing student in the hallway after class. Giving a warning that topics may be sensitive allows students who have difficult experiences to choose whether they want to participate.

- Second, it’s important to have an open-door policy. As professors, we are not counselors, and we are often bound by university rules to report a crime if we are informed it happened. However, it’s important that we listen to students who need to speak and try to find them help. After a difficult day in a class, we make sure to follow up with students who have told us they are survivors to ensure they are OK.

- And this leads to point three: We as professors should have a thorough knowledge of university and community resources available to our students. Counseling services are tight at all universities, but at some universities, professors have the ability to get students in crisis seen immediately by walking them over to counseling services or calling on their behalf. In addition, it’s important to know how to access sexual assault advocates and community services. If you don’t know where to find these services, start by calling your diversity or women’s centers on campus. They’ll give you phone numbers and websites to start your research. A great national resource with a counseling hotline and online chat, statistics, and practical information is RAINN, an organization that fights sexual violence. The number is 800-656-HOPE.

We should believe and support our students when they confide in us. We also should help them get the professional help they need. We advise you to always approach your students with compassion and empathy.

It’s almost guaranteed that you have students in your classroom who are survivors. We as professors don’t always know what students have been enduring in their personal lives. If you don’t know how to handle these topics with sensitivity, then ask a colleague or your diversity and women’s centers. Organize a class discussion that is productive and caring.

Candi Carter Olson, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of media and society in the Journalism & Communication Department at Utah State University. Her research interests focus on women’s press clubs as agents of change, newswomen’s history, and women’s use of social media to build community and organize activist groups. She was the 2016 American Journalism Rising Scholar award recipient, a 2012-2013 recipient of the American
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