Experiences of Teaching Controversial and Emotive Issues in Terrorism Studies Courses in the Politically-Charged Classroom: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand the phenomenon experienced by faculty members in higher education who teach courses in Terrorism Studies with curriculum containing controversial and emotive issues in a politically-charged classroom. The Jurisprudential Inquiry Model and the Curricular Instructional Gatekeeper Theory was used to provide a theoretical framework to address the issue of dealing with controversy and the idea that classroom teachers have great autonomy in determining the instructional content when addressing these emotive and controversial issues. The study included 12 college faculty members who teach courses in Terrorism Studies from several institutions of higher learning in the U.S. using face-to-face interviews as the primary collection method and supplemented with questionnaires and artifacts. The data collected through these methods is being analyzed using the process suggested by Moustakas (1994) to write a composite description of the phenomenon using textural and structural descriptions to develop the culminating aspects of the essence of the experience. The results of this study are to be determined. Preliminary results are being reported for this paper for the benefit of this conference.
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Since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, demand for professionals in the homeland security and defense community has placed new demands and requirements on colleges and universities throughout the United States (Supinski, 2011). Jobs in the Homeland Security fields are growing above the national average and students are seeking careers with the DHS, DoD, FBI, CIA and others federal, state, and local government agencies. To answer this demand, many schools are integrating courses in homeland security and defense in their criminal justice, political science, or other department as a means to attract students and make their programs more competitive.

This dynamic environment has not come without its challenges. One such area has been in the teaching of Terrorism Studies. Contemporary literature reveals that faculty members are pressured by various political influences (DeVolld, 2015). Horowitz (2007) is his book, Indoctrination U: The Left’s War Against Freedom, warned that college campuses have become heavily influenced by a politically liberal philosophy and are become antagonistic towards other points of view. They espouse politically correct behaviors and would object to linking the ideology of Islam to terrorism. Horowitz (2007) stated that terrorism is linked to the ideology of Islam. Conversely, there are many individuals who have argued against using the term “Islamic terrorism” whatsoever and say it creates a discourse that is unhelpful and damaging (Jackson, 2007).

This situation where faculty members are pressured from both sides of the political spectrum may be having an effect on faculty members and how they teach. Consequently, it may also have some kind of impact on student learning and the preparation of professionals entering the ranks of the security and defense career fields.

There is a significant gap in research that studies the phenomenon of these two influences in teaching Terrorism Studies courses. The problem has significant impact on these faculty members because they are often subjected to criticism and even disciplinary actions if students complain about how they handle certain controversial and emotive topics in the classroom.

What makes teaching Terrorism Studies so different from other disciplines? Terrorism is inherently a political subject (Jackson, 2007). Most every definition of terrorism attributes political goals as the objective of terrorist activity. Government actions to counter terrorism are, by definition, political acts (White, 2014).

Additionally, Terrorism Studies courses deal with emotional issues where students come into the classroom with
deeply-felt, pre-existing opinions that are often diverse and have polar extremes.

**Problem Statement**

College faculty members teaching courses in Terrorism Studies are faced with the problem of teaching highly politically-charged issues that are often controversial and emotive in nature. Students come into the classroom with perspectives based on different worldviews that can be the source of conflict and emotion. Faculty members may be expected to teach from a worldview or position different from what they may personally believe—academic freedom notwithstanding. This dilemma creates a phenomenon in which faculty members must reconcile these two competing influences. The reconciliation of these two influences will undoubtedly have effects on faculty members and how they teach. This phenomenon brings together the issue of academic freedom, political correctness, and a dynamic and highly-politicized field of study.

There is a significant body of research on teaching controversial and emotive issues that describes the phenomenon present in the classroom and attempt to provide ways of achieving positive outcomes in the classroom by overcoming the negative effects of the phenomenon. However, what is lacking in the literature is specifically teaching controversial and emotive issues in Terrorism Studies courses in today’s college classroom that may be politically-charged following the terror attacks of 9/11.

This phenomenon needs to be further understood and explained from an objective perspective. The problem is that there is currently no such voice to describe the experiences of faculty members who teach in this environment.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the phenomenon experienced by faculty members in higher education in the United States who teach courses in Terrorism Studies. Teachers are quite aware of the current political climate that pervades American education and the phenomenon that is present in the classroom (Hess, 2004). At this stage of the research, the phenomenon experienced by the faculty members involves teaching in an environment of academic freedom, but with political influences, especially those associated with controversial and emotive topics, such as the association between Islam and terrorism, targeted assassinations (drone strikes), coercive interrogation techniques such as waterboarding, and increased government powers to monitor citizens such as the Patriot Act and similar statutes.
Research Questions

Central Question: What are the experiences of faculty members who deal with teaching courses in terrorism as they relate to engaging in the discussion of issues that are controversial and emotive in the classroom?

Sub-question 1. How do instructors who teach courses in Terrorism Studies in higher education conceptualize controversy and emotion the classroom that is politically-charged?

Sub-question 2. How do teachers in Terrorism Studies courses in higher education understand academic freedom, especially as this concept intersects with their own teaching experiences with regards to teaching about controversial and emotive subject matter in the politically-charged classroom?

Sub-question 3. How do instructors who teach courses in Terrorism Studies in higher education change their classroom teaching strategies based on their conceptions and experiences of teaching emotive and controversial issues?

Sub-question 4. How have changes in teaching strategies affected teacher job satisfaction and student learning in the Terrorism Studies classroom?

Setting

The overall setting for this study is made up of programs at institutions of higher learning throughout the United States that are affiliated with the Center for Homeland Defense and Security’s (CHDS) University and Agency Program Initiative (UAPI) and offer courses in Terrorism Studies. This setting was selected because the overarching goal of this research is to improve the quality of graduates of academic programs that prepare officers to serve in defense and homeland security organizations who have the mission of protecting the U.S. from foreign and domestic terrorist threats.

Participants

Twelve participants were interviewed and a purposeful sampling was used to select participants who are most appropriate for the design and are representative of the overall population. This strategic sampling was done so the research may be more applicable to understanding the phenomenon across the entire population of college faculty members who meet the criteria. Participants were selected from schools small to large in size, private and state supported, and from all major regions of the united States.

Data Collection

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews of the participants served as the primary data collection method for
this research since it has the greatest potential to collect rich descriptions for a phenomenological study. This method of interviewing allows the participant to expand and reflect through guided questions (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to introduce questions and based on the response, formulate follow-up questions as appropriate. I introduced the topic and then guided discussion with specific questions, prompts, and probes (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Participants were encouraged to talk freely and to tell stories using their own words. The interviews took place through WebEx, an internet-based video conference system. The interviews were audio recorded by a personal recording device connected to a telephone headset. The audio recordings were professionally transcribed and later checked by the researcher for accuracy.

Participants were also asked to complete questionnaires and provide course materials. The questionnaires asked for personal information and initial comments addressing the research questions. Course materials, such as course syllabi, teacher-generated learning materials, and other materials, was also collected and reviewed. These materials assisted in the interview process and helped validate the data collected from the participant interviews, and allowed for data triangulation.

Data Analysis

The methods suggested by Moustakas (1994) was used to analyze the data. Phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and a synthesis of meanings and essences was performed. In order to do this methodically and correctly, a modified version of Colaizzi’s Seven Step Method (Colaizzi, 1978) was used. This modified method included the following steps (Sanders, 2003).

1. Reading the interview transcripts. In this section of the analysis process, participant narratives were transcribed from the audio-taped interviews. Each transcript was then read several times to gain a sense of the whole content of the interview. While reading the transcripts, I recorded any thoughts and ideas based on my previous experiences and added to the bracketing diary. Moustakas (1994) called the bracketing process an epoche.

2. Extracting significant statements. Any statements in the participants’ narratives that relate directly to the phenomenon of teaching controversial and emotive issues in a politically-charged classroom were extracted. This process is called horizontalization (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The significant statements that are extracted was be coded coded using the transcript page and line numbers.

3. Interpretative analysis of symbolic representations. This step took into account jargon and culturally-
specific phrases and anecdotes used in the defense, law enforcement, and homeland security communities. I translated the meaning of these phrases and included them in the list of significant statements.

4. Creating formulated meanings. Colaizzi (1978) recommends that the researcher attempt to formulate more general restatements or meanings for each significant statement extracted from the participants’ narratives. Each underlying meaning was coded in one category as they reflect an exhaustive description.

5. Aggregating formulated meanings into theme clusters. Colaizzi (1978) suggests that the researcher assign or organize formulated meanings into groups of similar type. In other words, the formulated meanings are grouped into theme clusters. Each cluster of theme is coded to include all formulated meanings related to that group of meanings. The researcher is in the process of conducting this step at the time of the writing of this paper.

6. Developing an exhaustive description. An exhaustive description will be developed through a synthesis of all theme clusters and associated formulated meanings (Colaizzi, 1978). All emergent themes will be defined into an exhaustive description. After merging all study themes, the whole structure of the phenomenon "teaching controversial and emotive issues in the politically-charged classroom" will be extracted.

7. Identifying the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. The fundamental structure refers to the essence of the experiential phenomenon as it is revealed by explication through a rigorous analysis of the exhaustive description of the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978). The groups of theme clusters will be developed to establish the final thematic construct.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a major consideration in this research. Creswell (2013) considered validation to be essential in achieving accuracy in the findings. Trustworthiness was achieved through using the methods of credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability. These validation strategies are commonly used in qualitative research.

Ethical Considerations

Human subjects was be used in this study. Therefore, consent forms for participants was approved by the IRB and strictly adhered to. The participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of this study and may withdraw at any time. Several steps will be taken to ensure the highest level of ethics and the protection of the
participants. These include anonymity, security of data, and avoidance of situations of influence.

Preliminary Findings

At the time of the writing of this paper, the researcher was in the process of developing theme clusters from the formulated meanings. The completion of the theme clusters and the development of the exhaustive description of these clusters, as well as the identification of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, has not been completed. However, a review of the data as this time does allow me to glean general comments about the data as they relate to the research sub-questions.

Sub-question 1. How do instructors who teach courses in Terrorism Studies in higher education conceptualize controversy and emotion the classroom that is politically-charged?

- The data show that faculty members are very aware of controversial and emotive topics in their classroom. The subjects of Islam, government surveillance power, and privacy issues seem to be the most difficult to deal with. They understand that students come into their classrooms with already deep-set opinions and are often very intransigent and not willing to respect other students’ opinions. This can sometimes create hostility in the classroom. Many feel that discussing controversial and emotive issues actually contributed to the learning process and motivated students to participate.

Sub-question 2. How do teachers in Terrorism Studies courses in higher education understand academic freedom, especially as this concept intersects with their own teaching experiences with regards to teaching about controversial and emotive subject matter in the politically-charged classroom?

- Most participants had a clear understanding of academic freedom and felt that they were generally free to discuss most all issues in their classroom. However, several expressed the fact that their school administration would not support them if there were a student complaint or they were accused of not being sensitive.

Sub-question 3. How do instructors who teach courses in Terrorism Studies in higher education change their classroom teaching strategies based on their conceptions and experiences of teaching emotive and controversial issues?

- Every participant shared the fact that they exercise extreme caution when addressing controversial and emotive issues in their classroom. They were careful in the words they choose and did feel that there was a risk if they offended a student. Every participant changed their teaching style when
Sub-question 4. How have changes in teaching strategies affected teacher job satisfaction and student learning in the Terrorism Studies classroom?

- Faculty members vary as to how they perceive job satisfaction based on how they have to adapt to the dynamics of the classroom. However, many do express job dissatisfaction and a few of the participants actually expressed a desire to seek different employment.
References


