

‘Across the Divide: Reflections of a Collaborative Class on Terrorism’

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‘Across the Divide: Reflections of a Collaborative Class on Terrorism’

Abstract: This paper attempts to provide some initial reflections of a collaborative cross-cultural class on the study of terrorism as a means of contributing towards a general pedagogy of the subject. While the experiences highlighted in this paper are held to directly correspond to this specific class, it is hoped that some general lessons can be taken and applied to other areas of pedagogy. In particular, this paper bears significance to the teaching of terrorism as a sensitive topic in the context of cross-cultural interaction as experienced through a blended learning environment.

Key Words: Terrorism, Sensitive Topics, Multiculturalism, Pedagogy

Introduction

At its core, this paper represents an immediate reflective exercise on the authors' experiences as creators and lecturers of a unique course on terrorism which brought together students from Dublin City University and Purchase College, State University of New York (SUNY) in a collaborative 'blended learning' environment (see, for example, Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003). This pilot course took place from 2 September to 17 December 2009 and was supported both conceptually and financially through the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiative based at the SUNY, without which, it would not have been possible¹. The developments of this course are especially instructive in that they bear relevance to qualifications on the teaching of terrorism as a sensitive topic in the context of cross-cultural engagement within an e-learning environment.

Terrorism, Culture and Sensitivity

Primarily arising in the early 1970s, the study of terrorism has grown exponentially. The events of 9/11 have sparked a contemporary 'explosion' of academic interest in the topic (see Silke, 2001, 2004, 2007), yet despite this cacophony of emergent voices, universal agreement on the very concept of 'terrorism' remains elusive. Scholars and policy-makers alike have struggled for (and against) consensus on the definition of terrorism—individual governmental departments run their own definitions of terrorism, nearly every sustained study of terrorism includes the individual author's working definition of the topic, and many academic works have been entirely dedicated to the 'definitional problem' within Terrorism Studies (see, for example, Carr 2007; Dedeoglu, 2003). The distinct lack of consensus on the definition of terrorism is not an isolated misnomer, rather it is an issue that pervades any engagement with the concept of terrorism to its very core: the study of terrorism is as much about creating knowledge within an accepted framework as it is about changing the framework itself. In the context of teaching terrorism, an initial question thus arises: how do we sufficiently engage the inherent subjectivity within terrorism as an academic subject and translate this to successful pedagogy?

The inherent subjectivity contained within 'terrorism' is not an isolated issue to be traversed in the pursuance of an accomplished pedagogy of the subject, however; one must also recognise its emotive capacity as a sensitive topic of inquiry. In the context of terrorism, in-class discussions do not 'merely' touch on issues of methodological validity or theoretical orientation, they also engage with more 'sensitive' issues such as the purposeful killing of innocent victims; questions of (ir)rationality with regard to terrorists and acts of terrorism; state culpability in acts of 'state' or 'state-sponsored' terrorism; female terrorists' involvement in the killing of innocent children; practices of torture, or the use of so called 'enhanced interrogation techniques' in the name of preventing terrorism; the restriction of civil liberties, and so on. It is thus essential to facilitate an environment for students whereby the sensitive capacity of terrorism does not overwhelm the classroom environment and stifle discussion. Defining the sensitive nature of a research topic is not an exercise in objective reasoning, however; as much as 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter', one student's sensitivity is another student's nonchalance. In the immediate context of teaching

¹ The COIL initiative seeks to promote the collaborative approach to teaching and learning across the humanities and social sciences. Set up in 2006, it is a relatively new venture, although it is gaining steady progress. This course is representative of contemporary developments within the COIL initiative. For more details on COIL, see <http://coilcenter.purchase.edu/>

terrorism, a secondary question thus arises: how do we adequately address the emotive capacity of terrorism as a sensitive topic and translate this to successful pedagogy?

As Raymond Williams pointed out in the early 1980s, teachers in cross-cultural environments must be acutely aware as to the dangers of “transmitting ‘knowledge’ or ‘culture’ in an absolute, universally derived sense” (1981, p. 186; quoted in Moore, 2000, p. 91). Today, such considerations of cultural awareness in education are arguably more important than ever given the increasingly multicultural nature of the modern classroom as situated in an increasingly globalised educational field (see, for example, Banks, 2009; Rosie, 2009). In this context, it is therefore essential to recognise the organic relationship between the internationalisation of education, and the macro-level processes of globalisation within which it develops, as a means of moving towards more holistic cultural awareness within the specific learning environment. It is thus on the level of the *dialectic* that cross-cultural awareness must be operationalised, for specific instances of cross-cultural interactions are necessarily related (and to a certain extent, bound) by macro level processes of cross-cultural relations (Clifford, 1997 in Singh and Doherty, 2004). Such macro-level processes can be extremely positive—as has been evidenced by the very possibility of our collaborative class on terrorism—but they can also be transgressive (*ibid*) to the extent that certain macro-level norms dictate how students think they *should* feel about a certain ‘other’ cultural perspective prior to any actual engagement with those deemed to bear this ‘other’ perspective. Indeed, this is perhaps best illustrated by an oft-cited characterisation that attitudes on terrorism are intrinsically divided between those from the United States and those from Europe (see, for example, Behr and Berger 2009; Soage 2006; Loveless, 2003). It is in this vein that we argue the inherently subjective and emotive capacities of terrorism are necessarily *magnified* by considerations of cross-cultural dynamics; both specifically within the collaborative class, and dialectically, in the perpetually shifting cross-cultural dynamics within which the class necessarily operates. With this consideration, we submit that our collaborative class on terrorism operates at an intersection of core issues: cross-cultural interaction on a sensitive topic from classifications of students who are popularly held to have differing positions on that topic. In direct relation to pedagogy, then, a third question arises: how do we factor in (and sufficiently manage) cross-cultural dynamics as applied to the inherently subjective and often emotive concept of terrorism?

Approaching the Collaborative Study of Terrorism from a Constructivist Perspective

As opposed to those approaches to student learning that emphasise the acceptance of ‘objective’ information as delivered by the teacher (such as the behaviourism), the constructivist approach highlights the student’s active engagement in meaning-making when processing information. As Exley and Dennick put it, “A constructivist approach aims to encourage students to take ownership of the learning process and develop their own learning according to their own interpretation of events and their own experiences” (2004, p. 5; cited in Leston-Bandeira, 2009, p. 4). By applying a constructivist approach to student learning, the inherent subjectivity operationalised within the literature on ‘terrorism’ can be translated to conceptually dovetail with the inherent subjectivity that is operationalised through the very learning process itself. The positive capacity of a constructivist embracement of subjectivity is of further

relevance in the case of teaching terrorism, given that sensitive topics typically force the corresponding researcher to question the taken-for-granted nature of associated truth claims more so than ‘less sensitive’ topics (Lee, 1993, p. 2). In terms of the specific pedagogy of our collaborative class, the key for us as lecturers has been to facilitate and promote a reflexive awareness on the part of the students. On reflection, it is our firmly-held belief that such an approach has operated as an effective means to navigate the potentially sensitive topography of the teaching of terrorism towards more critical engagement with the related key issues of inquiry.

Initial Experiences: Embracing Subjectivities

Although the individual in-class setup differed between the respective institutions (three hour class in NY; two hour class in Ireland), there were important common threads. Firstly, our syllabi were synchronised (i.e. both classes were discussing the same general topic in the given week); relatedly, discussions were grounded on shared core readings, which not only provided a common analytical foundation for both sets of students, but also promoted direct engagement and familiarity with some of the key literature on that given area; thirdly, our teaching styles each bore a strong inclination to promote class discussion, with our classes often evolving to an open-forum style format of discussion. The focus for both classes was to promote independent student engagement with the various concepts that were highlighted each week; core information would be provided, as well as some of the critical concepts surrounding the specific topic area. Following from (and often during) the delivery of this information, students were encouraged to engage and discuss with these issues and were consistently challenged to justify their position—crucially, this was not to ‘test’ to see if their perspectives were ‘correct’, but to tease out the reasons *why* their perspectives were such:

It was great that we were encouraged to have our own views no matter what they were and also communicate with each other [sic] about these views and question each other [sic]. I thoroughly [sic] enjoyed this course and would love to engage in further [sic] study.

(Student, NY)

I found this course extremely interesting. I found that it really challenged me and forced me to think about truly different things than almost any other class that I have thus far encountered in college. It really forced me to view things from all sides because in dealing with issues of terrorism and those surrounding terrorism there are very few simple, black and white moral truths.

(Student, Dublin)

In the context of the online environment, discussion was primarily facilitated through the provision of online forums. Both universities shared access to the Moodle programme, which provided a shared Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to all students. Students were required to contribute to the online discussion forums on a different topic each week, as corresponding to that week’s in-class topic. In the first week, students were asked to introduce themselves and comment on their initial subjectivities with regard to terrorism, prior to any engagement with course material². In combining individual requirements of an introduction with the submission of subjectivities on terrorism, we aimed to gauge students’ initial attitudes to terrorism,

² See Appendix

whilst recording some initial subjectivities with regard to cross-cultural awareness. It also provided an immediate opportunity for students to become more familiar with each other at the outset, and to become 'exposed' to a different culture through the discussion of personal perspectives on terrorism. Interestingly, this exercise also highlighted the embedded subjectivity in some students' perspectives as a result of some more 'personal' associations with terrorism:

The events of [9/11] and the days to follow are burnt into my memory and, unfortunately, shaped my intolerant outlook on acts of terror. However, as seems to be the common struggle among academics, my own opinion is skewed as I cannot always identify terror or terrorism for lack of a concrete definition. If it is going to be possible to successfully end this "War on Terror" then there needs to be a global understanding and agreement of what or who it is we are trying to apprehend.
(Student, NY)

There are members of my family who are members of Sinn Fein and I have relatives still serving time in Portlaoise jail for activities with the Real IRA. All this has led me to develop a firm opposition to violence as a form of political activity under most circumstances as well as a desire to understand better the motivation and the psychological background of people who become involved in terrorism.
(Student, Dublin)

Embedded within a large proportion of the initial posts lay a clear desire towards *understanding* terrorism, and understanding the motives behind those who carry out terrorist acts. Many 'myths' are propagated on various 'causes' and characteristics of terrorism (as is often the case with sensitive topics more generally; see Lee 1993; Renzetti and Lee, 1993), including the qualifications that terrorists are inherently irrational, that the Middle East is the primary enclave of terrorism, that terrorists are poor, and that terrorism can be defeated (see, for example, Miller, 2009). The provision of online discussion forums based on shared readings in the weeks following the initial online posting therefore allowed students to address and challenge such myths through cross-cultural peer-discussion in relation to some of the core terrorism literature.

I think that the forum posts are an invaluable way to gain an insight into another country's perspective. It also promotes cross-cultural learning, and since reading a number of posts on the forum by American students, I have been encouraged to gain further knowledge on a great deal of subjects I would never have even considered before.
(Student, Dublin)

Emphasis on peer-discussion is extremely important in this context, given its benefits in highlighting subjectivities more so than various other types of hierarchical teaching, whilst also exposing prospective 'myths' to more collective rigour (see Mazur, 1997; Nicol and Boyle, 2003). In the context of our collaborative class, it was therefore essential not only to expose the 'myths' associated with terrorism to more collective rigour, but to expose the 'myths' surrounding the cultural characteristics of American and Irish students to more collective rigour also.

Continuing Developments: Culture, Sensitivity, and Cultural Sensitivity

As the weeks progressed, students from both cultures became more familiar with one other in the online environment and we felt that this increasing familiarity was becoming more embedded within an increasing level of general reflexivity. As the promotion of a general reflexivity was integral to our approach towards a nullification of the potentially negative aspects of terrorism's inherent emotive capacity, it was therefore essential that cross-cultural familiarity should be maximised as the weeks progressed. Thus, interpersonal communication was extremely important. Our class utilised the provision of discussion boards through the Moodle VLE, which was shared by both universities. Students were assigned to contribute to these discussion boards every week on a corresponding topic as assigned by the lecturers. However, although most students adequately fulfilled their weekly duty to contribute to discussion forums, we found that direct interpersonal communication was relatively minimal, as is represented in the following excerpt:

I think the course suffered from not enough [sic] informal discussion, this may have have [sic] been due to the choice of moodle as the means in which to facilitate this course. I would suggest using a much more usable social forum like Facebook.
(Student, Ireland)

Although the provision of a social networking may have been ideal in the sense that students would have been able to interact more dynamically, from an ethical point of view, we could not place students in a position of being associated with the discussion of terrorism on a social networking site, given the concerns of privacy as well as possible prejudice from other members (see Gross and Acquisti, 2005). Indeed, such ethical concerns bear a further indication of the potential pedagogical difficulties arising from the sensitive nature of 'terrorism'³. In the absence of the immediate possibility of operating on a popular social networking site, we as lecturers must therefore take some of the blame as regards our failings as effective e-moderators (see Salmon, 2004):

If I could change something to better this course, I would have require [sic] online chat sessions where one or both lecturers were present rather than posts because I feel it would be a better learning experience and more beneficial to both student and lecturer to have that input available
(Student, NY)

Despite this failing on our part, general student feedback nonetheless indicates that peer-discussion as held within the context of the reflexive embracement of subjectivities provided an effective platform towards the positive dissipation of sensitivities and cross-cultural pre-conceptions. Students obtained further opportunity to directly engage with each other through the assignment of a collaborative group project, the due date for which was strategically assigned to the approximate mid-point of our syllabus in order to facilitate an emerging familiarity between both sets of students. As part of this project, groups of 4-5 students comprising those from DCU

³ An illustrative example of further note relates to the arrest and subsequent detention of then MA student Rizwaan Sabir and a member of staff at the University of Nottingham in 2008 for downloading the publicly available al Qaeda manual. Mr. Sabir's project directly related to the study of radical Islamist terrorism and it is widely acknowledged that he accessed the material for research purposes. The two were released without charge after 6 days' detention. Details can be found at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=402125>

and Purchase College were created and assigned to create a Wiki page (7000-8000 words) on a terrorist group. By assigning this project to the Wiki format, the focus was once again on encouraging diversity on a shared resource; thus exposing students to subjective views on terrorism whilst also engaging the students in cross-cultural interaction towards a shared goal. The results and corresponding feedback of the group project were mixed and unsurprisingly interrelated—those who communicated effectively did very well, those who did not communicate effectively, did not do so well. The key lesson in this respect is that a greater level of communication directly corresponded to the overall grade, thus further highlighting the virtues of an open communicative environment for student learning.

Conclusion

At an abstract level, the most pervasive aspect of this entire course has been the interaction between the macro and micro levels. With regard to the sensitivity of terrorism, feedback indicates that certain students felt that the study of terrorism was a ‘sensitive issue’, whilst others clearly did not. Certain students felt that cross-cultural sensitivities mattered, others did not. Certain students embraced established theoretical perspectives on terrorism as held within the associated literature, others did not. The point here is that macro level ‘truths’ relating to the very concept of ‘terrorism’, its status as an inherently sensitive topic, and of differing attitudes between Americans and Europeans on the topic are only ‘true’ to the degree to which the individual student holds them to be true. In this vein, our approach from the inception of this class was to foster an atmosphere for critical and open discussion, highlighting subjective knowledge over objective ‘reality’. Through this approach, the sensitivity of terrorism becomes that student’s own sensitivity, which can be engaged and discussed in an open forum environment of constructive learning. As teachers, we have also learned a lot, such as the need to further embrace our roles as e-moderators, and to facilitate the provision for more instant and dynamic communication between students. As a pilot course, we take much valuable knowledge and experience from our class, but its genesis lays in the individual experiences of each student. It is perhaps apt, therefore, that the students themselves have the final say:

Working with American students definitely added to my experience. It was an invaluable resource and allowed the class to engage in a productive discussion about terrorism and its implications. It was fundamental to the success of the course. The opportunity to converse with a different culture and the sheer diversity of opinions that we were able to access was a fantastic resource.

(Student, Ireland)

In terms of being in class I believe that I heard a lot of important viewpoints that really, I feel made me more aware of things, giving me outside perspectives on matters, something which in America you often don't hear to the fullest extent. Especially when it came to discussing EU policies and US policies in class the Irish students' opinions I found very interesting.

(Student, NY)

The different cultures made it more of a sensitive [sic] topic generally, but I think it was all dealt with well by both then [sic] lecturers & the students. Personally engaging [sic] with the moral issues is something that I found really difficult to do as it is the kind of topic where it is difficult to establish where the line is, but challenging [sic] us to think about things like [sic] was beneficial. I think the

different cultures/religions issues (& the week of women in terrorism) were dealt with well.

(Student, Ireland)

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Appendix 1

This forum has been set up towards the fulfillment of two tasks:

- 1) To provide an opportunity for LG343 students to introduce themselves to the cohort of students that are participating in this collaborative venture
- 2) To record some initial subjectivities with regard to personal engagements with the concept of 'terrorism'

As such, LG343 students are required to do the following:

- a) Provide a brief introduction of yourself: This is relatively straight forward (name, location, academic interests etc.) Please bear in mind that you will be speaking across cultures, so avoid confusing colloquialisms where possible!
- b) Provide a brief description as to why you chose to study terrorism. Why does the study of terrorism interest you? Please keep this as relevant as possible-- i.e. declarations that you wish to attain a high grade for your degree programme should be avoided.
- c) Attempt to identify and record any subjectivities that you feel you may have with regard to 'terrorism'. What does 'terrorism' mean to you, and can you identify any experiences that have shaped your personal engagement with the concept? (Exposure to media/certain media events; growing up in an environment where issues of 'terrorism' have been prevalent; cultural dispositions towards 'terrorism' etc.)
- 4) List some of the main factors (3-4) that *you* feel should be incorporated into any working definition of terrorism and justify this accordingly. This does not have to be justified with reference to any scholarly literature---rather, it is an attempt to discern some of your own subjectivities prior to any engagement with the associated literature. If, however, you have engaged heavily with some of the relevant literature on defining terrorism, then feel free to incorporate it here.

Please note that this forum has been set up in an attempt to capture an initial framing of students' subjectivities with regard to terrorism, prior to more in-depth engagement with various issues that will arise over the course of the semester. As such, this forum has been provisionally set up to allow ONE POST ONLY per student—so think carefully about what you are going to write and how you are going to represent yourself. This forum thread will be revisited over the course of the year towards an end of term submission on individual subjectivities that should represent some changes/consistencies in your attitude towards terrorism. It is hoped that this can be extended to comment on cultural frameworks and the shifting of attitudes through an engagement with a cross-cultural approach to the collaborative study of terrorism.

Regards,

[Lecturer]

Declaration:

Both James Fitzgerald and Anthony F. Lemieux hereby declare that this paper has not been previously published nor is it before another journal for consideration.