REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD
Teaching about sexual violence in digital learning environments

SAMANTHA KEENE and JAN JORDAN

Abstract

The use of local and nationwide lockdowns has been a necessary public health measure in the battle against the spread of COVID-19. Lockdowns have affected the higher education landscape by requiring university staff to shift their face-to-face teaching to either fully online, or blended, delivery modes. This shift to online delivery presents a pedagogical challenge for teachers of sensitive topics, such as sexual violence. Teaching about sexual violence safely requires a careful, considered and trauma-informed approach, usually established through building trust and rapport with students in the classroom. Building trust and rapport in the online environment, however, requires a redevelopment of traditional teaching approaches to ensure student safety. This reflexive commentary provides an overview of our experience when required to quickly teach an undergraduate criminology course about sexual violence in an online environment, brought about by a sudden lockdown due to COVID-19. We discuss the strategies and techniques we employed to safeguard and protect students completing our course in an online environment. These strategies may be of benefit to other university staff who are contemplating teaching sensitive topics online.

Key Words
Sexual violence, higher education, online teaching, sensitive content, COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the higher education landscape. Widespread lockdowns have seen academic staff forced to rapidly pivot their face-to-face teaching to online modes, often with little preparation and/or training in digital pedagogy. The perceived 'success' of academics' tireless transition to online delivery modes may see these ways of delivery becoming a permanent fixture on university course offerings. Thinking ahead, then, this commentary provides reflexive insights into our experiences delivering a final-year undergraduate criminology paper, titled 'Sexual Violence', in an online learning environment during COVID-19. Shifting from face-to-face to online teaching brings unique challenges, and it is important for academic staff to identify and share the diversity of resources, tools and best practices we employ in our teaching to overcome these hurdles (Danis, 2016). It is our hope that sharing the concerns we had about delivering this paper digitally, as well as the strategies we employed to do it, will be of benefit to others teaching sensitive material in online learning environments.

As COVID-19 cases exploded internationally, Aotearoa/New Zealand adopted a 'go hard, go early' strategy to halt the spread of the virus (Baker et al., 2020, p. 198). On 25 March 2020, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a State of National Emergency and imposed a strict nationwide lockdown that placed all non-essential workers in self-isolation. The lockdown announcement was unprecedented, and in response, our institution required all courses to be shifted to online delivery.

Designing courses for online delivery is not something that occurs overnight; rather, it requires substantial consideration and preparation, making the task more 'frontloaded' than

face-to-face teaching (Danis, 2016, p. 1477). Online teaching requires a minimum level of technological ability and skill, and educators must also learn and understand the social dynamics of digital learning and teaching in their new online classrooms. Haggerty acknowledges that the onus on academics to establish and maintain their presence in their online classrooms 'is often the one aspect of online learning that academics are most concerned about in regard to the time it takes to provide a quality, facilitated learning environment' (2015, p. 197). The requirement for faculty staff to immediately shift our teaching online, then, was a daunting prospect.

As criminologists, we were particularly apprehensive about the prospect of teaching online due to the sensitive nature of much of our course content. Students in criminology classes are regularly exposed to material that can be challenging, sensitive and/or distressing (Whitehead & Parker, 2017). Teachers of criminology courses, therefore, have a moral duty to adopt an ethics of care in teaching that minimises possible student distress following exposure to course content (Dalton, 2010). This ethics of care for students in our courses predates the pandemic.

In one of our courses (CRIM324: Sexual Violence), we situate critical examinations of sexual violence within a broader sociocultural landscape of patriarchy, gender inequality and rape culture. The topics include justice system revictimisation of victim/survivors, women's objectification through pornography, and technologically facilitated sexual violence. In reflecting a feminist commitment to hearing the voices of women who are often silenced, we also include case studies and qualitative material as complements to academic research. We attend to issues of *both* victimisation and resistance in our teaching for the course, thereby allowing us to view women 'not just as vulnerable victims but as strong and agentic – even when they suffer violence' (Hollander, 2016, p. 87). We also recognise and include material on masculinity and male sexual victimisation, as well as on ways to involve those of all gender identities in rape prevention.

In this course, we endeavour to foster a learning environment that is safe, empathetic, supportive and validating of victim/survivors of sexual violence. In recognition of the chronically high rates of sexual violence in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the subsequent number of students in the course who will have lived experience of trauma, it is important that we are proactive about centring the needs of victim/survivors in our teaching from the beginning (Bedera, 2021). As instructors, we do this in several ways. In our first lecture, we directly acknowledge the presence of victim/survivors in the classroom and we explicitly validate their experiences. In preparing students for the course, we are honest about the nature of the course materials. We acknowledge that some content will likely be confronting, triggering and/or distressing, and that this may be amplified for some students more than others. In recognising the various ways that student distress may manifest, we provide suggestions for addressing their emotional needs. All students are given information about free, or low-cost, specialist health and support services available at the university and in the wider community. We make this list as current, comprehensive and accessible as possible to encourage students to make use of these services. Lastly, we provide space throughout the course for students to visit us during private student consultation hours. We signal to students that these hours are confidential and safe spaces for them to meet with us and discuss any issues that the course may raise for them. We take care to clarify that, while we are happy to provide a listening ear, we are not trained therapists. We offer to assist students in contacting specialist support if that is their wish.

Student disclosures of trauma have been common in our experience, as others teaching similar content have also observed (see Branch et al., 2011). Students feeling able to make disclosures of trauma to their teachers requires a high level of rapport and trust to have been built between the student and teaching staff. Disclosures of this nature are unlikely if students do not feel such safeguards exist (Bedera, 2021). Most of the rapport and trust we have with

students is built through our in-person interactions with them in the classroom. Alongside the supportive environment fostered within our classroom, our usual requirement for students to attend lectures, rather than accessing recorded lessons, enables us to read the room during lecture delivery. Teaching in a face-to-face context provides opportunities for assessing student reactions to challenging content via non-verbal cues, such as through their body language and facial expressions. When we teach sensitive or challenging content, we are highly attuned and responsive to students' reactions to the content they are hearing. This helps identify when, and if, a shift in teaching approach may be required in the interests of student safety. Face-to-face delivery also helps us identify 'teachable moments' as they arise through in-class discussions. As educators, our ability to swiftly respond to teachable moments relating to sensitive issues can help build trust and rapport with students, thereby influencing the classroom environment as a whole. As teachers of sensitive subjects, then, it is especially important that we recognise, and appropriately respond to, teachable moments when they surface as they can provide important scaffolding in our construction of safe and trusted learning environments.

Given our ethics of care and our duty to minimise student distress, we had several reservations about delivering this paper in an online environment. As feminist criminologists, we are acutely aware of the emotionally involved and challenging nature of doing sexual violence research (Jordan, 2008; Keene, 2021), so we were concerned about our students engaging with heavy content in complete isolation. We were also concerned about student privacy whilst engaging with sensitive lecture material in their homes. We were conscious that students may not have private spaces to view course materials, and we wondered how students would participate in conversations when others in their household, such as flatmates or family members, may overhear them.

From an equity perspective, we were also concerned about students' access to digital technologies and internet capabilities in their homes. While several financial assistance packages were made available by the government during the pandemic, these were rarely extended to university students specifically, except for some temporary measures (Ministry of Education, 2021). Universities across Aotearoa/New Zealand stepped up to provide financial assistance for students, such as through hardship grants and loaned laptop schemes. However, we were aware of students in our course who struggled to access hardship supports in a timely manner during the lockdown. We questioned how we could redesign the course content to best meet the needs of students with limited access to digital capabilities and to ensure they were able to complete the course successfully. Beyond concerns about students managing the course content, we knew, as feminist criminologists, that lockdown environments would result in increased levels of family and sexual violence across Aotearoa/New Zealand. We also expected that victims' access to support services may be limited or, in some instances, unavailable due to lockdown restrictions. In sum, we expected students would require more support than ever while completing this course.

Our expectations soon proved to be correct and we were confronted with high levels of student stress and distress, much of it stemming from the shock and anxiety triggered by the sudden lockdown. Nicole Bedera (2021) contends that instructors teaching the topic of sexual violence need specialist subject expertise, and they should be reflexive and responsive to students' needs in their teaching. We were fortunate to be assisted in the delivery of this paper by two highly experienced tutors who had extensive knowledge of sexual violence-related issues, as well as professional experience as sexual violence prevention educators. Having the assistance of such skilled and competent assistants on our course gave us the confidence and assurance we needed to ensure that the paper could be successfully redesigned and delivered safely in a solely digital and COVID-anxious environment.

So how did we proceed with delivering a paper on sexual violence in this fully digital environment? Drawing on the first author's prior experience with online teaching, we replaced the traditional lecture format with weekly, pre-recorded video modules for students to engage with in their own time. Each module consisted of between five and eight pre-recorded video lecture segments that, as well as the usual PowerPoints, were accompanied also by links to supplementary materials, such as YouTube videos, news media items and TED talks so that students could further develop their learning at their own pace. To reduce the intensity of the course content and address attention span issues, we made the modules shorter than traditional lectures. This reduced the intensity of the course content, gave students the option to skip content they may find distressing, and reduced the amount of streaming broadband required for engagement.

Although creating these pre-recorded video modules and sourcing appropriate YouTube videos greatly increased our workload, course evaluations indicated that students particularly appreciated the adaptations we made to the course structure for delivery in a fully digital environment. For example, student evaluations noted that 'the delivery of content with a mixture of lecture material and supplementary external video clips kept me engaged', and 'I valued being able to choose when I could sit down and watch lectures based on when I felt I was in a good head space to receive such sensitive information'.

In recognition of the significant disruption that the lockdown was having on our students, we also scaled back assessment requirements by reducing essay word limits, reweighting assessment percentages and removing mandatory tutorial attendance requirements. We knew how important it was to create an environment where students trusted us and felt able to communicate with us about the challenges they were experiencing during the course. We worked hard to be as 'human' as possible, despite the distance between us and our student cohort. We regularly provided video updates in place of written announcements to enhance our digital presence. We communicated with students via Blackboard more regularly than we would during face-to-face delivery. This proved effective, with student evaluations identifying the 'constant communication and support offered throughout the course' as a specific aspect that stimulated or helped them to learn.

Alongside our constant communication through video and written announcements in the digital environment, all staff involved held regular 'drop-in' sessions which, when students attended, dually functioned as both learning support and pastoral care check-ins. In the absence of building in-person rapport, we introduced students to our pets and provided them with a glimpse into our home lives, letting them get a 'feel' for who we were as their teachers. Further, we ensured that we remained up to date with what support services were available for them at the university, and we kept informed about how support services were operating in the community during lockdown. We communicated this information regularly to students through multiple online channels in a further attempt to build the trust and rapport we were used to developing through our face-to-face interactions with students.

Teaching courses about gender-based violence can be emotionally challenging for students, but they can be just as emotionally challenging for academic staff involved in their delivery (Bedera, 2021; Nikischer, 2019; Sheffield, 2012). In the online environment, the emotionally laborious nature of teaching sexual violence content was exacerbated by our need to be constantly visible and present, and we certainly do not wish to understate the added workloads we experienced teaching this course online. However, the duty of care to our students in this paper took precedence for all of us involved in teaching it. This ethics of care needs to be evident throughout tertiary institutions so that staff teaching sensitive material are listened to and supported regarding both students' needs and their own. Faculty staff involved in administering academic workloads should recognise and take into account the increased

workloads arising from pastoral care work done by academic staff teaching courses on gender-based violence.

As we reflect on our experience delivering a paper on sexual violence in a digital environment, we acknowledge that, to be delivered safely, the course required teachers with a unique set of skills and expertise. Both our own and our tutors' knowledge and expertise in the topic of sexual violence meant we were able to foresee the possible needs of our cohort and plan rapidly for the delivery of this paper in a fully online learning environment. With student safety and wellbeing at the forefront of our thinking, we managed to deliver a fully remodelled online version of our course that received resoundingly successful student evaluations. We encourage others who are planning the delivery of online courses about sensitive topics to make use of the expertise of scholars and practitioners working in these fields – from course conceptualisation and design through to facilitation and delivery. By drawing on the expertise and insights of those working in the field, future courses can be developed in ways that safeguard and protect student safety and wellbeing in online environments to the best of staff abilities, ultimately enabling students to flourish through their academic studies.

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