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Bad Sex Ed: First-Day Icebreaker for Classes on Sex and Sexuality

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to all my amazing students from Feminism and Pornography; also to Kristin Allukian, RJ Boutelle, Monica Mercado, Faith Barter, Melanie Medeiros, Jennifer Guzmán, Makini Beck and Jess Hardin.

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Bad Sex Ed: First-Day Icebreaker for Classes on Sex and Sexuality

Introduction and Rationale

Teaching any kind of sexually explicit materials in the undergraduate classroom can be challenging. Class discussions can feel awkward; expectations about what counts as academic—and even polite—are upended. I have found that I worry *both* about students oversharing *and* that they will not feel safe or comfortable enough to speak at all. As Decena (2010) explains,

> Addressing sex in the classroom demands the reconceptualization of the rules of engagement between teachers and students. Sex also implicates us (and often our identities) in wanted and unwanted ways as teachers and mentors, challenging us to grapple with the consequences of our pedagogical choices in the lives of students.

But this challenge that Decena describes is also a substantial opportunity: it is possible to provide both a framework and a language to students that allows them to talk about topics that they have been told their whole lives are too private or shameful to voice aloud.

For this reason, I devised a first-day icebreaker activity for an undergraduate women's and gender studies course that I teach, Feminism and Pornography: I ask students to talk about their experiences with bad sex ed. Like many of my colleagues, I often use icebreakers on the first day of a class in order to practice names, get to know my students as people, and help them get to know each other, the first step in creating a supportive and engaged classroom community. But, as one university website about first-day icebreakers astutely notes, "many learners do not like icebreakers, as they require learners to take social risks without facilitating familiarity" (First Day Icebreakers). The stakes are even higher in a course that asks students to talk frankly about sex and sexuality; but there are significant potential benefits to using an icebreaker that is not only thematically relevant but is shaped by trauma-informed pedagogy. As Imad (2020a) writes, "Trauma-informed pedagogy requires having a keen awareness of our students' past and present experiences and the effects of those experiences on students' well-being" (para. 14). On that all-important first day, having students think not only about what they know about sex but how they came to know it is an important first step in establishing a learning environment that is not only rigorous but also safe and inclusive.

Learning Objectives

Because this exercise is intended for the first day of class, the learning objectives are modest and meant to build a foundation for more complex discussions later in the semester: 1) establish the rules of engagement for how we will discuss sex, gender and sexuality; 2) begin to identify the values embedded in the knowledge about sex and bodies they already have; and 3) begin to recognize and name the gaps and elisions in what they were taught. These objectives were chosen to support specific principles from trauma-informed pedagogy as articulated by Mays (2020b). In wanting to foster connection between instructor and students, she recommends practicing "radical hospitality," and in the hope of connecting students to one another, she explains her idea of "guiding community": creating a safe space by allowing students to talk about their experiences and daily lives.

Background and Context

In the U.S., sex ed curriculum is controlled at the state level and, almost without exception, does a terrible job of providing young people with the information they need to navigate adult sexual relationships.[1] Only 28 states and the District of Columbia require that it be taught; 35 states require that schools teach abstinence (if they choose to offer sex ed at all); and 15 states do *not* require sex education or HIV/STI instruction to be any of the following: age-appropriate, medically accurate, culturally responsive, or evidence-based/evidence-informed.[2]

The situation is even more dire for LGBTQ youth. In a summary of the studies on this issue, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) (2021) reports that over 24% of LGBTQ+ students had never had any school-based sex education, and of students who had received sex education in school, only 8.2% reported that it was inclusive of LGBTQ+ topics (p. 1). Not only are queer people left out but "Nine states explicitly require teachers to portray LGBTQ people negatively in health education instruction or prohibit teachers from mentioning LGBTQ people" (Eisenstein, 2020).

There are profound consequences to this deeply inadequate education. Young LGBTQ individuals are often already targets of violence and bullying, and these gaps in the sex ed curriculum not only contribute to this hostile environment

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[1] A majority of states require that sex ed emphasize abstinence (and this is in the context of assuming all students are cisgender and heterosexual) and studies have shown those programs do not even help those students reduce the rate of unwanted pregnancy or of sexually-transmitted infections. For more information, see the position paper from the Society for Adolescence Health and Medicine, "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Policies and Programs."

[2] https://siecus.org/state-profiles-2019-announcement/

but can encourage stigma (HRC, 2021, p. 6). Rubin (1982/2011) explains these gaps, elisions, and erasures more broadly: "Knowledge of sex is restricted….The younger one is, the harder it is to access information about sex. The systematic restraints on curiosity about sex maintain sexual ignorance, and where people are ignorant they are manipulable" (Rubin, p. 125). My exercise, then, has students externalize this very personal topic (and helps them get the giggles out). The nervousness, the lack of vocabulary, and/or the impoverished state of their knowledge is not a personal failure. In other words, I stress this is about other people's failures, failures that happened in the past that might have had traumatic consequences for them.

In-class Method

Since the exercise is intended for the first day of classes, no pre-reading or work is required of the students. After briefly introducing myself and the course, I describe the activity by saying that this is an opportunity to talk about the sex education they received as part of their K-12 education. I put the students in small groups and pose two questions: 1) *who* led any school-based discussions about puberty and sex and *how* were these discussions introduced and structured? and 2) what one thing do they remember from their sex ed curriculum that turned out, in retrospect, to be incorrect, misleading and/or damaging to them? I also encourage them use anatomically-correct and value-neutral words for parts of the body and sex acts and ask them to pay attention to when slang/profanity (which I reassure them I will not be offended by) or euphemisms are used in the stories they share.[3] This invitation to share–where the students' words and experiences form the basis for our course–is meant to suggest my offering of, as Imad (2020b) puts it, "radical hospitality," where students come first in the way I conceive of my job as college instructor. And the requirement that these memories are first shared with their peers is intended to begin to build the "guiding community" wherein students take responsibility in listening to and caring for each other.

Discussion and sort into categories: I then ask that they share out to the larger group. There are a range of responses to the first question: from the one lucky student whose school contracted with Planned Parenthood and thus received a genuinely comprehensive education; to the more-typical, well-meaning but poorly-trained physical education teachers; to students who went to sex-segregated Catholic secondary schools and so were instructed by nuns or priests. Many students will reveal that they were sorted into discrete groups of "girls" and "boys"

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[3] To offer just one quick example, student comments will often make clear they don't understand the difference between the "vulva" – a word that describes the external genitals of someone assigned female at birth – and the "vagina" – the opening of which is visible as part of the vulva but is actually the muscular tube that leads to the cervix.

in even the earliest grades in order to receive different information, which not only has the effect of naturalizing the sex/gender binary and excluding nonbinary and gender nonconforming kids but implies individuals of the "opposite sex" need have no working knowledge of the bodies of their peers. I often will ask follow-up questions at this point: what kind of preparation do they think these instructors had? What does it mean to have these discussions when everyone, including the instructor, seems embarrassed? Was the instruction part of a standalone class or tacked onto something else? What does it say about the priority their school placed on imparting this information?

Catalogue misinformation: the second question, about wrong/biased information is the one that opens the floodgates—I find it is best just to make a list on the board of everyone's contributions. Then I ask the class to start sorting the stories/misinformation into categories: the sexual double standard (e.g. a woman is like a piece of tape that collects lint the more it is used and loses its stickiness); beliefs that contribute to rape culture (e.g. boys/men always want sex and girls/women are instructed to stave them off); factually incorrect information (e.g. testosterone being characterized as the "male hormone" when it is present in all bodies); the erasure of LGBTQ individuals with ostensibly neutral framing (e.g. the term "sex" is almost always assumed to mean penis-in-vagina sex). I also use this opportunity to explain/reassure students the class will use a sex-positive framework. For example, I state that sex can be used for all sorts of purposes: for example, there is nothing inherently wrong with casual sex if both (or all!) partners want the same thing and from here on out, I explain, the presence of consent will be our yardstick. All of this is meant to underline that most humans (here I also find it useful to nod to asexual identities by saying there are exceptions) experience these desires but that this all occurs within the history of patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, the enforcement of the sex/gender binary, sexism, and sexual violence against women and LGBTQ individuals.[4]

Teaching only about reproduction–a common tactic of early "puberty" curriculum—also lets sex ed curriculum dodge the fact that most people, straight and queer, have sex for pleasure.[5] If it has not come up already, I often will pose this question explicitly to the class, "to what extent did you talk about the role of pleasure in sexual relationships?" Here it is not only practical information that is

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[4] The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2015) reports that 43.6% of women and 24.8% of men have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime (pp. 2-3); in addition, nearly half of respondents in the U.S. Transgender Survey (2015) reported being sexually assaulted in their lifetime (James, et. al., 2016).

[5] Research on sex and sexuality has recently begun examining the role of pleasure in sexual health and found that "a growing body of evidence suggests that positive sexual experiences such as sexual satisfaction are also strongly associated with more classic measures of sexual health (e.g., the ability to protect oneself from disease and unwanted pregnancy)" (Higgins et al., 2011, p. 1643).

missing (e.g. "if you are a gay man who enjoys penetrative anal sex, here is how to use condoms safely") but whole frameworks of being, doing, and feeling.

The other alarming gap in traditional sex ed is the lack of attention to cultural and racial differences: most curriculum fails to be open about its cultural biases (usually Judeo-Christian and white) or bothers to tackle racist stereotypes about sex (e.g. Black men as predators or Asian women as passive objects). And, in fact, Imad's (2020a) list of trauma-informed pedagogical strategies also urges instructors to "pay attention to cultural, historical and gender issues" (para. 24). Foregrounding this as a grievous lack on the first day of class, and a lack that our course will address, can help reassure students who inhabit marginalized identities that they will be represented in the course curriculum.

Conclusion

First, using this exercise offers a concrete first-day plan that generates copious discussion without any preparation required from students. Determining what your students already know about sex and sexuality—and how they came to know it—foregrounds the difficulty of these kinds of conversations while also modeling vocabulary and the unembarrassed attitude necessary for incisive discussions of the subject matter. In my experience, this exercise has consistently produced lively discussions (so lively that it often almost facilitates itself!) that has been effective at setting the stage for more complex course content. Students regularly refer back to the exercise later in the semester by noting that they wish a certain concept or idea had been included in formal K-12 sex ed.

Second, this activity is useful in a wide variety of courses in a range of disciplines. I have found the exercise to be adaptable to other classes (my institutional home is an English department) as it creates a solid foundation for any discussion of sexually explicit readings or watchings, even if these materials are only a small portion of an overall course. Its use value, then, is not just for the first day, it can be used at any point in the semester preceding assigned sex-themed content; it is still enormously effective in establishing a context within which to discuss difficult material. A colleague in History has successfully used the exercise in a class on the history of sex and sexualities: she reports that her students bonded over shared experiences: finding out their "bad" sex ed experiences were not unique or uncommon was an eye-opening start to the semester, and self-evaluations suggested that this perspective animated their entry to the historical material as well as to looking for gendered dynamics. I could even see it being fruitfully deployed in something like an introductory anatomy and physiology class.

Finally, this first-day icebreaker provides a concrete example of how systems of power work and are perpetuated. It makes real and immediate for students the damaging personal/social effects of *not* talking about sex and sexuality

in honest, serious, and critical ways—it provides them with a social framework for understanding their own pain, sadness, and anger. But it does that in a way that then asks them to take an active role in correcting the misinformation of the past by practicing talking about sex and sexuality frankly and with an open-minded curiosity.

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