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A professor deals with student reactions to sexual assault topics in class (essay)

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When I began graduate training, I was inundated with advice about how to survive in my chosen profession. Specifically, I received tips on teaching -- how to grade papers efficiently, how to foster a meaningful class discussion, how to have boundaries with students regarding grade contestations and office hours while also creating a safe space for learning. I was told to grade students' work as uniformly and objectively as possible. I value all of this advice, yet I was left unprepared for what would happen in the future when I taught a gender course.

It was the middle of the semester, and we were covering rape culture ^[1]. As any feminist instructor who has ever taught about rape culture probably knows, covering this topic is challenging for a multitude of reasons. Sometimes we encounter students who realize that they have been raped who come to office hours looking for resources. Other times, students learn that they have actually perpetrated rape and struggle to reconcile that with their images of themselves as "good people" and "not one of *those* (usually) guys." And many feminist instructors, especially those who are women, know all too well what it is like to navigate the "mansplaining" ^[2] of a few men students who would like to ardently deny that rape culture exists. Such students may make claims like the following, among others:

- In response to discussions about the fact that what a woman is wearing does not give someone license to rape her, nor does the rate of sexual violence have anything to do with clothing choice: "But don't you think what she was wearing is at least *a little* important?"
- In response to conversations about the structural barriers to reporting rapes, and the estimated number of rapes that go unreported: "But why *wouldn't* she report it? It's kind of on her."
- In response to demonstrating the staggeringly low rates of "false reports" in contrast with the alarmingly high concern lawmakers, the media and the general public seem to have with this artificial trend: "How do you know that it's *really* rape?"
- In response to pointing out that someone is incapable of consenting if they are intoxicated: "Well, don't you think she should have been more aware of her surroundings? Less drunk? It's kind of her fault."
- In response to the fact that we live in a society that valorizes men's violence against and dominance over women: "Boys will be boys" or "locker room talk."

Every so often, however, men students may present a reasonable shortcoming of the prevailing rape-culture rhetoric, such as "Why don't we talk about when men experience rape? How can we make space for that dialogue without pushing aside women's experiences with rape and systemic inequality?"

This is a valid question, and the inquiry is on point. We need to make space for men (as well as nonbinary people) to share their experiences with rape, since the foreclosure of such space stems from the very same mechanisms of inequality that facilitate rape culture in the first place.

When I encountered a paper that began with this question in my gender course, I hoped that the student would take the paper in that direction.

He started by citing an example of a case he read in the news media in which a woman on a college campus raped a man and the institution responded poorly. However, I first felt a twinge in my spine when I looked up the source of his story and traced it back to a men's rights advocacy ^[3] group. "OK," I thought to myself, "students use questionable sources all the time, often because they might not have the skills to distinguish objective journalism from something like an MRA group. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt here and make a note of it for the next paper."

Unfortunately, his argument quickly devolved into a tirade claiming -- since he presented just *one* case wherein a woman raped a man -- that feminism is pointless and women are complaining too much about gender inequality. He wrote that men and women experience rape culture in *exactly* the same way, and claimed talking about gender inequality was just an effort to make men look bad. He said that women brought these things upon themselves by making people, and specifically men, angry and annoyed via conversations about feminism and rape culture. He did not even feign a presentation of data to back up his argument after the initial example; rather, he simply ranted against feminism, women and open discussions about the sexual violence women regularly experience.

As I went over his paper, I realized that I was reading a paper that sounded word for word like something the man who raped me would say. And not only did this sound like something my rapist would say, this student fit the same demographic profile as him: white, college male, between the ages of 18 and 22.

I got up from my desk and went for a walk. I could not concentrate. I had plans to read a book later that afternoon, which were shattered by being thrown back into a pit of traumatic, fragmented memories by this student's paper. I was furious at the fact that, as an instructor, I was expected to take his paper seriously, and scared of what he might do if he did not like his grade. Although I knew it was unlikely that this student would literally try to rape me, his words felt so familiar that I began having trouble distinguishing him from the man that did. Their words were so frighteningly similar that the rational-instructor side of my brain could not overpower the trauma-survivor side.

None of my training or experience prepared me for something like this, not even advice from the few feminist scholars I have had the pleasure of knowing. I was in a position where I had to take this student's words seriously, evaluate their merit and provide a percentile score based on how well I thought they fit the parameters of the assignment.

"Zero! You get a fucking zero!" I literally screamed at my computer screen. I decided that I was not ready to return to grading papers yet, so I got up and went for another walk.

I felt irritated that in two pages of (poorly written) ranting, this student was able to undercut whatever authority I thought I had as an instructor. Authority that, especially as a woman instructor, I worked hard to establish and maintain. I imagined him sitting on the other side of his computer screen laughing at my pain, joking about my distress. I imagined him being friends with my rapist (though the man who raped me is now significantly older than this student, he is frozen in the 18-22 age bracket in my mind). How, I wondered, could I possibly evaluate this student's work in an "unbiased" fashion? Such a request would involve me living an entirely different life than the one that I have had.

I returned to my computer late that night. I pulled up his paper, took a deep breath and began to read it again. No one ever advised me how to grade a paper that sounds like something my rapist would say, so I suppose I will have to train myself. After all, I am certain that I am not the only instructor to have to navigate this dynamic, and I am sure this will not be the last time that I have to navigate it.

Author Bio:

The author is a sociology instructor at a public university in the United States. This essay was originally published on the blog [Write Where It Hurts](#) [4].

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Links:

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape_culture

[2] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mansplaining>

[3] <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/warren-farrell-mens-rights-movement-feminism-misogyny-trolls>

[4] <http://www.writewhereithurts.net/theres-no-manual-for-this-surviving-rape-apologists-in-the-classroom/>

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