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# The Myth of the 50-Minute Epiphany: #MeToo and Implications for Teaching

## ABSTRACT

Because university campuses are microcosms of broader political and social climates, the increasingly polarized climates outside universities can permeate the classroom, challenging faculty who teach topics characterized by controversy and discomfort. We conducted a lesson study project at a college in the southeastern United States in three first-year courses from different disciplines to examine how the broader tensions of the #MeToo movement emerged and affected a class activity focused on gender. We sought to understand our students' responses to a moment of discomfort generated by discussions of sexual roles, consent, and assault—issues that are relevant in both this cultural moment and in the lives of many first-year college students. We observed responses ranging from affirmation to resistance in what felt at times like our own failure. Without this collaboration, each of us may have been left with a narrower view of what the students learned and an incomplete sense of our own work. What began as an investigation into students' transformative learning experiences ended as a transformative experience in our own understanding of the acts of teaching and the complexities of student learning.

## KEYWORDS

gender, lesson study project, sexual assault, political polarization

*“The very acts of trying to teach well, of adopting a critically reflective practice to improve our teaching and our students' learning, . . . are acts of hope because they imagine that process of transformation as one in which a better future takes shape out of our students' critical refusal to abide in the limitations of the present.”*

—Kevin Gannon, *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*

We also describe our teaching as an act of hope. We aspire to help our students imagine a world beyond “the limitations of the present” and become the best versions of themselves. Our SoTL project was a response to a moment in a specific cultural and political context<sup>1</sup> that called for us to draw on this well of hope in new ways. We were teaching in the United States in the wake of #MeToo, a social movement in which survivors of sexual assault and harassment shared their stories on social media and called for widespread change. This phenomenon culminated in a sexual reckoning that played out as the

country's president was elected after bragging about assaulting women (Transcript 2016). Further, while this polarized climate complicated classroom discussions of contentious social issues, a "culture of safetyism" framed engagement in these controversies as "unsafe," heightening students' anxieties and defenses before the conversation even began (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 30). In this article, we consider how these tensions emerged in our classrooms during a discussion about consent and assault. We conducted a lesson study project within three first-year courses from different disciplines to gain insight into how our students grappled with these topics in an era of increased social division, fear of public shaming, sensitivity about gender issues, and conflation of discomfort with danger.

## OUR PROJECT

Our project convened four professors (anthropology, English, cultural studies, and sociology) and a faculty developer from a private liberal arts college in the southeastern US. The average class size at our institution is 17, and our student to faculty ratio is 11:1. Our institution's mix of 2,000 undergraduate students includes a 60:40 female-to-male student ratio, 23% eligible for funding reserved for students with "exceptional financial need" (Federal Student Aid), about 10% international, and approximately 20% identifying as Hispanic/Latino. Despite gains toward a more diverse student body, the dominant campus culture occasionally carries the reputation as an elite campus for privileged students. The students in our study were all in their first year and relatively new to the norms of engaging in our small, discussion-oriented courses. Our classrooms, then, serve as a crucible in which national trends, emergent and residual cultural norms, and students from different backgrounds come together.

Although members of our team come from different disciplines, the courses in our project are part of a general education program designed to introduce students to a range of disciplinary ways of thinking. Each course intersected with issues raised by the #MeToo movement, allowing us to design a common lesson that would fit the differing content and perspectives, as well as our commitment to revisiting how we teach and how students learn these issues in different cultural moments. Recognizing the current climate's potential chilling effect on our classrooms, we wanted to understand our students' responses to any discomfort generated by a lesson with discussion of sexual roles, consent, and assault—issues that are relevant in both this cultural moment and the lives of many first-year college students. In our first team meeting, we gravitated toward the desire to help students see beyond what we described as "the singularity of themselves," a way of viewing the world through an individualistic lens grounded primarily in personal experience and a "makes-sense epistemology" (Perkins, Allen, and Hafner 1983, 177). We sought insight into what happens when that lens is challenged by alternative ways of seeing the familiar, such as a disciplinary lens expanding their field of possibilities (e.g., the sociological imagination, ethnocentrism, intertextuality) or a systemic lens situating their experiences within broader, more complex contexts of society and culture.

Given our interest in a specific learning experience and the varied areas of expertise of our team members, we agreed that the structure of lesson study projects—designed to apply multiple perspectives on students' grappling with a challenging concept—was most appropriate for our SoTL research. A lesson study project is team-based research that allows teacher-researchers to examine their students' learning and their own teaching practices (Cerbin 2011; Wahman et al. 2020). The study design includes the collaborative development, implementation, observation, and analysis of "a live classroom lesson as the centerpiece of study" (Lewis, Perry, and Murata 2006, 3). Widely practiced in Japan, lesson study projects were introduced in the US in 1999 as part of a large international study of teaching and

learning in mathematics and science (Lewis, Perry, and Murata 2006) and are now practiced globally, often as SoTL projects focused on specific learning moments (Cerbin 2011; Wahman et al. 2020). Consistent with existing cross-disciplinary lesson study projects, ours followed phases of planning the lesson, conducting the study (including classroom observation by the entire team and collecting other artifacts in the form of student materials), analyzing the data individually and collaboratively after in a series of meetings, and then reflecting on findings (Lewis, Perry, and Murata 2006, 4).

In three courses (see Table 1) in February of 2019, we studied our lesson spanning one class period bracketed by pre-class preparations and a brief post-class writing. Before class, students read “Sexual Consent on College Campus” (Bennet and Jones 2018), a common reading for our campus’s general education program, and wrote a brief response to the reading. To scaffold the class session and prime the students for a discussion on gendered roles and expectations, we began with a whole-class discussion about students’ recollections of learning about norms for sexual engagement. We then used Jackson Katz’s “chalkboard exercise” of first asking the men in the class to share how they protect themselves from sexual assault on a daily basis and then asking the women to share the steps they take (Katz 2006, 2–3). The class ended with students capturing in writing their current states of mind, allowing them to process their thoughts. After class, the lesson ended with another brief writing guided by prompts for analytical reflection. (See Appendix for our detailed lesson.)

In the team’s ongoing meetings, we shared teaching techniques, research methods, professional commiseration, and ideas to bring back to our respective classrooms. Before delving into students’ responses, we processed our own learning in moments of critical self-reflection about how learning happens in the complex environments of our classrooms (Brookfield 1995). Notably, when we reconvened after our classroom observations, we feared we had failed. We’d hoped students would see how sexual norms structure their experiences and begin to trouble the binaries of those structures. We’d surfaced student attitudes, but did we move them? This question revealed our tendency to frame learning as a linear progress narrative. We realized that teaching is often predicated on a model of learning in which students move from point A to point Z: one of us shared, “It’s like we wanted to get them to Q, but they’re stuck at D or G.”

We realized that at least some of our feeling of failure was about a simple wish that the students would’ve been farther along in their understanding when they walked through our doors (i.e., had #MeToo not already prepared them for this conversation?). We knew that this project was just a single lesson, but we wondered if we’d failed in moving any students at all. We also felt unmoored by what we missed. After each lesson, we gathered outside the classroom for a quick debrief and someone inevitably exclaimed, “I didn’t even see that happen!”. We had also interpreted silence in the classroom one way, but later discovered from the students’ writing that what we had imagined beneath that silence was entirely wrong. Ultimately, we realized that our expectation for a linear progress narrative couldn’t account for the full dynamics of the classroom and may have led us to an incomplete sense of our own work.

Our intentions for linear development of the students’ political sensibilities in this lesson is matched by the general expectations of teaching and learning. A simplified conception of learning as the acquisition of knowledge or skills, or shifting from one way of thinking to another, lends itself to such a progression fallacy. We talk about students progressing through courses and curricula neatly labeled 100, 200, 300, and so on. We aim to help students develop understanding and skills, and growth mindsets, moving from novice to expert along a continuum of cognitive development, through a scaffolded

curriculum of increasing complexity, decreasing support, and greater independence. Indeed, when reflecting on our lesson, we realized that our team—despite knowing better—had believed in the myth of the 50-minute epiphany. These assumptions about student learning undergird how we talk about effective teaching as well. Particularly among our pre-tenured colleagues who are on the tenure track, good teachers are the heroes in a progress narrative in which their students move neatly from not knowing to knowing.

However, this isn't how learning or teaching works in reality. In a study about her diversity courses, Dianne Fallon rewrites the common explanation of student resistance in which they will fully stop on the path toward learning. Instead, she explains, students may experience “a metastable state where they truly are striving for complexity, but then revert to another position that feels more comfortably aligned with, or less challenging to, the value system and past experiences that they've brought with them to the classroom” (Fallon 2006, 413). They're still in the experience of learning, which is “not a linear process but instead is characterized by fits and starts, by ‘metastable state’ peaks, moments of ‘contradictory consciousness,’ retreats to comfortable clichés” (Fallon 2006, 415). Similarly, in writing about disruptive moments in religious studies classrooms, Jill DeTemple and John Sarrouf describe “teaching into the wobble” as “a disruptive state where we are forced to reckon with the push and pull of ideational gravity such that we may pause or even stumble a bit before correcting our own course” (DeTemple and Sarrouf 2017, 8–9). In the seemingly linear framework of disciplinary “threshold concepts” that are characterized by (among other things) transformation and irreversibility, Ray Land, Jan Meyer, and Caroline Baillie caution against assuming “an overly rigid sequential nature” in this learning, which is instead a path “of recursiveness, and of oscillation” (2010, xi). Cognitive psychologists argue against the traditional, sequential path of blocking one topic, skill, or concept at a time, as in “AAABBBCCC,” by demonstrating the benefits of interleaving, or mixing up the order of related skills and concepts in something like “ABCABCABC” (Lang 2016, 65; Pan 2015, n.p.). Despite these cautions against treating learning as a linear progression, we found this tendency to be simultaneously a powerful tool and an obscuring force for making sense of student responses.

In our analysis, we thematically coded students' written and oral work to more intentionally understand student responses. Fifty-four students were in the three classes, 51 offered informed consent to participate in our study, but only 48 were present in the observed class (Table 1).

**Table 1: Course gender composition**

Course	# of students observed/enrolled in course	Observed gender
English	19/20	8 men, 11 women
Anthropology	19/22	12 men, 7 women (1w, 2m absent)
Sociology	10/12	2 men, 7 women, 1 trans (2m absent)

We did not formally collect demographic data from the students because we worried that students might experience the request to explicitly self-define their gender as intrusive, which could interfere with a classroom atmosphere of the degree of trust needed for this lesson and our observations. This omission represents one limitation of the project, and we cannot speak precisely to the ways students with multiple intersecting identities engage with topics like sex, sexual assault, and consent, which can alienate sexual and gender minorities (McGarry 2013), erase experiences unique to racial and

ethnic minorities (Wooten 2017), and desexualize people with disabilities (Campbell, Löfgren-Mårtenson, and Santinele Martino 2020). Accordingly, we encourage future projects on similar topics that are attentive to the intersectionality of students' and instructors' identities.

To code written responses, each team member engaged in a descriptive coding process (see Saladaña 2013, 88) that started with reading all pre- and post-class reflections and our class observation notes to identify emerging themes. After manually coding each artifact, we met to reach consensus on a list of codes. We then re-read these materials to identify illustrative behaviors and quotes. Rather than determining intercoder reliability quantitatively, we did so qualitatively through developing a code matrix (see Tolley et al. 2016, 187) to determine agreement and consistency. In reviewing the themes, we noticed the different responses fell along something like a spectrum, which we realize follows our tendency to think in linear terms. We tried to map out the nuances of the observed responses, avoiding as much as possible the suggestion of a progression or developmental stages in students' thinking and instead something more like Fallon's "fits and starts," DeTemple and Sarrouf's "wobble," and Land, Meyer, and Baillie's "oscillation." (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1. A map of student responses**



## A TAXONOMY OF OBSERVED STUDENT RESPONSES

### **Grateful awakening**

We asked students to reflect on their experience of the class discussion twice: first, in the final five minutes of class and again in a few paragraphs led by prompts and submitted in the 48 hours after class ended. In both sets, at least eight of 48 students expressed a feeling of grateful awakening through phrases like “eye opening,” “shocked,” “surprised,” “informative,” and “enlightening.” In our preliminary planning discussions, we wondered whether the saturation of #MeToo in the current media environment would make it difficult to push students past a parroting of familiar cultural scripts. On the contrary, this subset of students described the conversation as missing from other contexts and expressed gratitude for their classmates’ openness and honesty and to us for creating the occasion to have the discussion, as captured by one student: “I was really impressed by the mutual respect that everyone had towards each other which, as a result, allowed us to discuss topics that can be touchy and controversial. I, personally, have never experienced anything like that in an academic setting before.” Although some students in each class demonstrated a greater familiarity with the topic and hence some frustration at their classmates’ perceived lack of depth, a larger number of students believed they learned something new.

### **Finding solidarity**

In students’ writings and in our class observations, we noticed some students asserting a sense of solidarity, explicitly identifying with classmates from their own gender group. These active expressions of group identification were striking in their (at least momentary) extension beyond “the singularity of themselves,” or the individualistic notions that inhibit their recognition of social and cultural norms, patterns, and systems. The most pronounced way this solidarity emerged was parallel to the broader #MeToo messages of (mostly) women asserting and validating the shared experiences of fearing sexual threats or violence. During the Katz activity when the women were asked to share how they protect themselves from sexual violence, something clicked. As individual students named strategies (e.g., asking a friend the agreed-upon code “Do you have a hair tie?” to signal they feel unsafe), other women in the class—including those who hadn’t yet spoken and were, according to their professors, typically quiet—sat up straight, leaned forward, looked at each other, and called out, “That’s a great idea!” or “We use that, too!” In all the classes we visited, the effect of the specific question and the pedagogical strategy of giving them uninterrupted time and space to speak about their experience was clear: the women expanded to fill that space, and to fill it together. Many of the students reflected on this moment in class as one of epiphany and comfort in solidarity. Joan<sup>2</sup> wrote:

It was very eye opening that all the girls had one if not two or more things to put on the list. We all wanted to share. I think there was a comfort in the fact that everyone wanted to participate and everyone was experiencing the same things.

Tori recalled:

I felt understood and included by the rest of the girls in the class who were nodding and remembering their moms telling them these same things but I felt excluded by the guys in the class who couldn’t relate and frankly was surprised none of the men could add something.

Tori illustrates a specific response to the moment of solidarity: connecting to one identity group in contrast to another, observing an “us” at least in part defined by the separation from a “them.” Tori, surprised when the men were silent in response to the question of how they protect themselves, couples her connection to her female classmates and their mothers’ lessons of safety with her disconnection from “the guys,” further distancing them with the switch to the formal language of “the men.”

### **Empathizing**

In another class, a female student recalling this part of the activity wrote, “When all the girls were listing off the things they do to stay safe, I noticed how alienated most guys were.” In this instance, the student went beyond observing the distance between the genders by expressing empathy—an act of connection or moving closer—with the “guys,” rather than Tori’s expression of separation. We saw many such moments, as well as significant connections across gender lines when men empathized with the experiences of the women in their lives: “when we were talking [about] . . . the sexual harassment and consent topic, I couldn’t help but think of my sister. I wouldn’t ever want her to go through something like this.”

Although we saw plenty of instances of students enthusiastically validating their classmates’ (both men and women) straight experiences, these same students withheld such empathy when one student voiced how a queer individual would experience a similar situation. This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion depending on the student’s identity suggested the current limits of their empathy.

### **Lamenting**

The goal of the pre-class reading (testimonials of sexual assault) and the in-class activity (gendered “safety exercise”) was, in part, to highlight the scope of sexual assault in girls’ and women’s lives, a reckoning that might nudge students away from an individualist lens on sexual assault towards a systemic understanding of social structure and rape culture. However, for a sizable minority of our students, the enormity of the problem appeared to trigger a retreat to an emotionally safe space of sorts, one dictated less by outrage and empathy and more by lament, sympathy, and even pity.

One manifestation of this expression included repeated use of the phrases, “I find it sad . . .” or “it is unfortunate. . .” For example, “I just find it sad that women always have to worry about being assaulted and live with constant anxiety.” In a similar vein, Madison wrote, “It is unfortunate that the world is like this.” This language recurred across at least seven students’ written reflections. By labeling the situation as “sad” or “unfortunate,” they maintain a positive, sympathetic, even virtuous sense of self, yet these labels also lend themselves to a sense of intractability. It makes sense that some students would lean into sadness after reading about and discussing the large-scale issue of sexual assault, and perhaps they’re merely responding to a sense of overwhelming frustration at the scope of the issue. However, we fear that, in evoking sadness paired with the immutability of the inequalities of our society, these students may slide into apathy, rather than problem-solving, social action, or advocacy.

### **Dismissing lived experience**

Some students responded by emphasizing victims’ feelings of their victimization instead of acknowledging the reality of their victimization. Our hope as instructors was that, after reading multiple testimonials of victims and hearing female classmates list safety tip after safety tip, students couldn’t deny the reality of sexual violence in women’s lives. Some students, however, evaded this reality by using

“feelings” as a mediator between lived experience and plausible deniability. One student, Laura, wrote: “It is sad that women feel so targeted.” While a subtle distinction, there is a difference between the expression of women feeling targeted and women being targeted. Other students used similar language about women acquiescing to unwanted sex as an obligation: “I feel terrible for anybody who has felt they owe sex to someone.” Such comments shift the responsibility away from men coercing women into sex and onto women who need to manage their feelings of obligation, as if the feeling of owing men sex is not a lived reality. Students are unlikely to realize that this particular use of language both avoids a deeper analysis and privileges a narrow, individualist account of moral responsibility.

### **Seeking definitions**

Some students’ post-class writings described a need for clearly defining what constituted sexual assault: “the one thing I noticed that we did not talk about during our discussion is what exactly defines sexual assault,” wrote John. A desire for definitions could be a way to provide comfort in what some students, like Sarah, identified as ambiguity around sexual assault: “One thing that I felt was unspoken during class was the idea of what consent actually is. . . . There is a lot of gray area surrounding this topic, and while I understand that it is sensitive, it may have been useful to define it.” One student, Aidan, felt such urgency around the question of definitions that he approached the instructor multiple times in the subsequent weeks and asked to discuss the topic more.

John, Sarah, and Aidan’s desires for definitions may reflect a developmentally appropriate unease with ambiguity and a desire to have a “correct” opinion. Moreover, a need for a definition may also be related to broader forms of political and social polarization and a desire to have the “correct” information that supports a particular perspective. Put into the context of the currently fraught debates over “cancel culture” and “free” public speech, information such as a definition, which may seem neutral and apolitical, can potentially bolster an informed stance on a topic and a broader perspective. Definitions can serve as a type of factual currency supporting students’ claims and can be useful in discussions that occur among students outside of classrooms, particularly around sensitive topics like sexual assault.

### **Vacillating**

Some students also gave contradictory responses, sometimes within the same response or even sentence. For example, Kyle moves toward a moment of empathy with his female classmates—“I can’t imagine what it must be like to constantly have that nagging thought of ‘what if someone rapes me right now?’ going through your mind”—but then can’t quite sustain it as he then dismisses those perceptions by concluding, “I’m glad [our school] has such a safe and small campus where people know each other.” He seemed to step toward sympathy for the experience of women and then immediately stepped backward into a reassuring denial. Moments like this suggest an internal conflict in which the student expresses a position, but then withdraws from that apparent certainty. This vacillation resembles Fallon’s “metastable state” in which students tentatively try to integrate a new perspective (2006, 413).

### **Distancing**

Similar to the moment of retreat within a vacillation, some students more directly steered away from addressing situations that, as Sarah observed, felt “too relatable” by distancing themselves from the subject—or, more precisely, by distancing the subject from themselves. In an after-class reflection,



another student called out the class discussion for focusing on the problem of stranger rape, arguing that “93% of cases involve a family member, friend, or spouse.” Both students saw their classmates acknowledging sexual assault as a problem, but then relocating the problem as something that exists “out there.” The most common form of distancing focused on ways to avoid assaults by strangers: “keys in hand,” “pepper spray,” “don’t go anywhere alone at night,” “be aware of your surroundings.”

One substrain of this dynamic emerged when some female students absolved their male counterparts as threats because of their socioeconomic status. One piece of advice shared by the women in one class was to “be extra nice to \_\_\_\_\_ [Uber drivers, men, homeless people].” Another student wrote that she could identify with a classmate’s experience of being catcalled and went on to say:

Because you would think running through the neighborhood next to [our] campus would be safe. The houses are nice so I assume the people who live in them are wealthy so it makes me feel safe running through there, but the construction workers make it hard for me to feel safe.

Rather than question her assumptions that wealth=safety, this student channeled her fear toward the population outside of her social station. These impulses to distance contain the fear of women who might rather turn away from “too relatable” instances of peer assault and protect the men in the group from being implicated in a campus rape culture. As the more hostile elements of the discussion (below) suggest, however, these attempts at absolution toward men in their peer group are not enough to lessen the men’s fears. The threat of being called out as a potential abuser is powerfully felt, even when the conversation is consistently pushed away from the more immediate circumstances of campus sexual assault.

### **Asserting aggressive absence**

Beyond distancing, which is on some level an understandable response that may protect students while engaging with topics that are “too relatable,” a few students simply refused to engage at all: in two classes, three students who the professors anticipated might be openly hostile to the material did not attend class, a rare behavior on our campus. These students previously had derided others’ perspectives on sex and gender and mocked women’s march participants and the overall #MeToo movement. Jeff and Evan further expressed a general disgust with sensitivity for others’ perspectives by openly mocking “safe spaces” and “political correctness,” and asserting that these matters limit free speech. In a written reflection Jeff submitted, despite not attending class, he wrote:

The modern day classroom, the modern day world, seems to be filled with critics, each lunging at the bit to tear away at any politically incorrect or controversial statement that is laid before them. In my experience, during discussions such as these, men seldom talk out of fear that they will be prosecuted [sic] by those in the room that disagree.

Despite advocating for more direct discussions around controversial topics, these students were noticeably absent from this opportunity to engage.

Although we aren’t certain about these students’ reasons for missing class, there are several ways to reflect on the power dynamics coded in these absences, especially in the context of the students’ past behavior. For example, absence may be a way to refuse exposure to differing opinions. This resistance

may reflect an overall effort to repudiate any efforts to persuade them to think differently or even to receive information that may change their perspectives. Absence, then, can be a student's attempt to control exposure to content by silencing and thus asserting power over the professor and peers. This type of disengagement, which we refer to as "aggressive absence," ultimately allows privileged students to not only usurp the power accompanying their self-created narratives of victimhood, as demonstrated in the concerns of being unfairly "prosecuted" by his peers, but also to maintain a power hierarchy that sustains white, heteronormative, male hegemony.

Alternatively, these absences could be due to experiences they're unwilling to express because of expectations of masculinity. Perhaps, for some students who perform hypermasculinity, the tension between discussing sensitive topics like sexual assault and expectations of masculinity can be difficult to manage. Straight-identifying men face significant pressures in the US to not identify as victims of crime, leading to underreporting of several types of crime, including sexual assault. In this context, the topic of sexual assault may lead some men to feel vulnerable, and these feelings conflict with their classroom personas, so they elect to be absent.

### **Victim-Blaming**

The emotionally charged issues of consent and sexual assault resulted in some students engaging in significant victim-blaming behaviors, simultaneously reflecting broader rape culture and contributing to its reproduction (Wade 2017, 220; Edwards, Bradshaw, and Hinsz 2014). We observed three types of victim-blaming: a "mistakes on both sides" narrative, a transitional "rape is always wrong, but . . ." response, and condescension to women.

#### *"Mistakes on both sides"*

Some students blamed victims by pointing out culpability on both sides during an assault. One student was explicit: "It's a horrible thing to say, but there were big mistakes on both ends." It also took the form of more convoluted comparison. Kyle took issue with a testimonial in the assigned reading from a male reflecting that he likely committed assault while black-out drunk:

I just think he is being unfair to himself when he assumes that because he blacked out during sex, he might have assaulted a girl. When this story is compared to Sydney from Virginia's, I can see a clear double standard because her anecdote is about blacking out during sex too, but she presumes afterward she was sexually assaulted.

As Kyle reflects on the two unrelated testimonials, one written by a male questioning consent in his past and one a female victim, Kyle insinuates that if alcohol consumption can exclude women from giving consent, it should also exclude men from responsibility in perpetrating assault—or a "mistake" on one side must absolve a "mistake" on the other.

#### *"Rape is always wrong, but . . ."*

Other students engaged in a type of victim-blaming that reflects shifting cultural norms, wherein students have been exposed to training on consent and college assault. These students condemned rape, but proceeded to undercut the strength of this position by projecting some degree of blame onto the victim. In one class, Zack expressed both verbally and in writing that rape is "wrong," yet he struggled to

accept one woman's claim of rape: "I question why the narrator did not just express these feelings [of non-consent] verbally."

Another student, Madison, uses language that stakes a clear position on women's right to exist unabused, regardless of context. Yet, she too, immediately follows this position with victim-blaming:

Yes, of course I sympathize with her because nobody should ever be taken advantage of sexually and should not have to do anything that they were not completely willing to do in the right state of mind. But, she did put herself in the situation when showing up to an unfamiliar place with mostly people she did not know. There were signs throughout the night that should have stood out to her.

In this statement, Madison can simultaneously stake a contemporary and feminist-friendly take on sexual assault, while also undercutting the whole notion of women's right to unfettered existence.

#### *Condescension to women*

While we expected some victim-blaming from students, we were not expecting this particular form of victim-blaming that we refer to as "condescension to women." Here both male and female students called out the female victims in the *NY Times* piece as too naïve or uneducated to be sexually active. Joan gives her perspective on one victim's testimonial of rape:

In her descriptions it seemed like she never learned consent which would mean to me that she isn't ready in the first place to have sex. . . . I hope that she found the confidence in herself to be more careful and stick up for herself.

By referring to a lack of education on consent, Joan conflates sex with rape. In the process, she blames the victim, who in Joan's estimation only needed a little more education and self-confidence to avoid being raped.

We also witnessed students claiming to "just not get" female victims' testimonials discussing a pressure to consent to unwanted sex. Their responses asserted a disconnection through phrases like "I have never put myself in that position" or "I would never do something that I am not comfortable doing." For example, Brett shares his difficulty in empathizing (or even sympathizing) with a female's testimonial on feeling pressured to say yes to men who pressured her for sex:

One account that I did not understand was Elise's from California. She states that she always says yes to hooking up even though she doesn't want to. This does not make sense to me because I feel that regardless of the situation a yes means yes.

In "not understanding" women's fear and pressure to consent to unwanted sex with men, Brett and other students ultimately blame victims for not saying what they mean, suggesting that they may struggle to think beyond their own frame of reference and the common tropes of western individualism, including a magnified sense of personal agency. Imagining a secure, sovereign self is stabilizing, especially in a discussion that requires a confrontation of one's own vulnerability. It is perhaps unsurprising that

students are not quite ready to understand the complex and gendered structures that shape choices without simply collapsing into familiar tropes of rational independence.

Although victim-blaming in sexual assault is rampant in US society (Fitzgerald and Grossman 2018), it might seem out of step on college campuses where students receive federally mandated Title IX training on consent and have grown up with feminist tropes of empowerment. Yet, they've also grown up in a culture in which assault rates, particularly for women, remain high, and victims are rarely believed, leading to underreported sexual assaults. This conflict of ideology (female empowerment) and reality (sexism) creates cognitive and emotional dissonance in students. When confronted with the topic of sexual assault, many perhaps then engage in victim-blaming to assuage their dissonance, for "Even women often blame the victim, in part because it's one of the only ways for them to feel safe" (Wade 2017, 221).

### **Reframing men as victims**

Although women in the US are far more likely to be victims of sexual assault than men, and 90% of adult rape victims are women (Department of Justice 2000), some students repeatedly drew attention to men as victims, both of sexual assault and false accusations. Although factually correct, this use of male victimization averted attention to the significantly larger problem and instead focused on men as victims of silencing, sexism, and women's false accusations.

#### *Men as victims of silencing*

Several students expressed concern that men were being silenced on the issue of sexual assault, either preemptively or after sharing their beliefs. One male student accused his professor of suppressing classroom inclusion by overtly preventing the men from speaking:

The problem [of sexual assault] has been mentioned to death especially on the internet. The only time [the class discussion] left me speechless was the end because by that point, it wasn't a conversation to everyone. It was a discussion between the professor and women almost victimizing the male gender in its entirety by showing what they have to do to protect themselves . . . It slowly felt like it was turning into a personal, subjective conversation rather than an objective, all-inclusive one.

This accusation of silencing men as a function of professor bias is peculiar, given what we observed in the class in question. During this class, multiple members of the research team noted the impatience of a handful of men, including this particular student, when they were required to wait to share until after the women had finished their half of the class activity—even though the men had already been given their chance to share before their female peers. Four men were observed raising and even waving their hands in the air when the women had the floor. When the professor leading the class upheld the predetermined structure of the activity, reminding the men that they would not be called on until the women were done with their list, there was palpable tension in the room, with one male student refusing to put his hand down for several seconds. As sociological research shows, when majority group members are used to hoarding resources and then are required to share with minority groups, they view even small incremental shifts as large in scale (Schwalbe et al. 2000). In this class, perhaps these male students,

accustomed to dominating class discussion, felt silenced when denied access to a small portion of the class discussion.

*Men as victims of women's lies*

In all iterations of this shared lesson plan, we observed concern that men are routinely victimized through women's false accusations, with consequences perceived as monumental. Some students only felt comfortable bringing it up via post-class reflection writing:

During class something I felt unsaid was how men now are concerned more about being falsely accused of rape. I didn't say this in class as it felt like a sensitive topic. Though when I'm with a female I'm always making sure she is ok with what is happening.

Some students, however, felt comfortable enough to bring up false accusations in the pre-class writing: "As a male this has resulted in an increased need to be cautious and protect yourself because a girl's word can ruin your entire reputation."

In one iteration of the lesson, after the specter of false accusations had been raised, the professor asked students to estimate how many sexual assault accusations are proven to be false. The modal guess from students was 40% to 50%. Existing evidence, however, indicates false accusations account for only 5% of all sexual assault allegations (De Zutter, Horselenberg, and van Koppen 2017). The professor then reported this FBI statistic and asked students to reflect on why such a gap might exist between the evidence and their much higher perception. During this part of the lesson, one male student shared an anecdote about women falsely accusing football players of rape and "how it ruined their lives." These discussions of false accusations changed the tone in each class, as we observed some female students getting quiet, physically withdrawing after otherwise animated body language, holding side conversations with one another, and looking down at their desks.

**CONFOUNDED BY SILENCE: WHAT THEY DON'T SAY MAY NOT BE WHAT THEY MEAN**

In planning this project, we were curious about what happens in the silences in our classes. As both instructors and classroom observers, we became vexed by some of these silences. It's tempting to focus on what we assume are signs of engagement: students offering verbal responses, or even just leaning forward, nodding heads, or making eye contact with whoever's speaking. These verbal and nonverbal cues become our evidence that the lesson is doing something for students. It's all too easy to read silence and nonparticipation as signs of apathy, withdrawal, or even resistance, especially when accompanied by blank stares, crossed arms and legs, slumping into a chair, or even leaving the room.

In light of the critical roles of identity formation and belonging for American college students (Strayhorn 2019), lessons that invite students to bridge the gap between the self and other, challenge boundaries they may have experienced as offering stability and security, and step past years of enculturation are not easy, even for those who already sense the social rules of gender and sexuality as oppressive. Our lesson asked students to consider their own experiences and to imagine those of others; we hoped they would understand gender and sexuality in a way that contradicts the highly individualized and relentless neoliberal media constructions of gender and sexuality as expressions of marketable personal identity and personal empowerment. What then does it mean when students seem to withdraw?

We were reminded that the relationship between the behaviors we observed and students' actual learning experiences are complex. Silence and more active signs of disengagement could demonstrate boredom or rejection, but they might also serve as masks, or visible responses to the affective or cognitive flux that Fallon describes as "a temporary state of energy that fluctuates," a moment of reverting or pulling back in the face of the challenges diversity poses to existing world views and identity positions (2006, 413). Students who we observed as withdrawn in class wrote reflections before, during, and after class that troubled our assumptions that they were reacting negatively. Unlike their visible behavior in front of classmates, many of these students expressed more nuanced experiences in their writings for their instructor (and the research team).

Unsurprisingly for those who teach such content, some students disclosed painful personal experiences in their writings, and while the facts within the disclosures aligned with the common statistics about college students' experiences, we realized that their voluntary act of disclosing to us became a significant part of their participation in the learning activities. For example, a student we observed not talking in class—often with arms (or arms and legs) crossed—wrote in her after-class reflection about her experience as a survivor of sexual assault. She and others moved past abstract observations about what "men" or "women" might experience and took a specific, personal engagement with the material. They tended toward first-person pronouns in their responses and offered something personal from their own backgrounds. These disclosures included phrases like "I've never myself gone to a club," "I was brought up to be a very conservative [Christian], so [?] my only real exposure to sex and such is through movies or the weird 5<sup>th</sup> grade sex ed videos," and "I haven't had a boyfriend [or] kissed a guy." Other students described their proximity to experiences of sexual assault, identifying themselves as friends or siblings of people who were sexually assaulted. One student's reflection confirmed an observer's sense of her discomfort during the class session: "It was hard not to choke up in class or show emotion as a survivor of sexual assault." Although these first-person disclosures still fall under the individualist framework that persisted for many students, the willingness to locate themselves and to share that location with a professor (and the research team) suggests serious engagement with material, rather than withdrawal or resistance to the lesson.

Another common theme in some silent students' writing was a sense of discomfort due to lack of direct knowledge or experience. Some found themselves "not even knowing what to say" or "unfamiliar of how to talk about [the lesson topics] in a class setting." Another student worried, "Everyone in the class seems to have a different level of knowledge than I do so I feel small and irrelevant the majority of time." Sometimes this lack of knowledge was experienced as gendered. A male student wrote, "I feel like as a male my opinion on the topic is not as important as the female perspective on the topic." Silence here could be, at least in part, a gesture of solidarity with women in the room.

Sometimes, this worry about a lack of knowledge or experience was expressed as avoiding the risk of hurting others or being judged themselves. Jennifer worried about "offending other people," and an anonymous student wrote, "I didn't think my views on the subject matter enough to hurt someone else's feelings." For these first-year students on a small campus, fears about others' opinions became a self-silencing force. Students wrote, "I usually stay away from participating . . . because I worry too much about offending other people or being judged," "I feel judged when I give input even if the class is deemed a 'judgment-free zone,'" and "[I am] scared of sounding shy or my answer being incorrect."

Further, some students who found class discussion to be a difficult venue for expressing themselves managed their own solutions. Alicia observed, "Writing things out is my way of 'speaking' in

the class. . . . I also feel included when I have a side commentary with . . . whoever is sitting next to me without speaking in front of the whole class and being scared of judgment.” For first-year students, and particularly in the context of our small campus where students rarely find anonymity among their peers, writing allowed them to express themselves and process what they were learning without fears of social censure. We found student writing like Alicia’s to be a necessary complement to their in-class participation—or lack thereof. It served as a helpful corrective to our impulse to interpret students’ responses as fitting neatly in our affirmation-to-resistance spectrum. We were especially likely to make these assumptions when we relied solely on observation of student behavior in class, so these more nuanced and unspoken responses remind us of the necessity of surfacing student thinking outside of in-class discussions and activities.

### CONCLUSION: MAKING MEANING AS WE TEACH FOR TRANSFORMATION

We in the US often celebrate opportunities for students to engage in difficult dialogue as a value of liberal arts education, but our lesson study project foregrounded both familiar and unexpected complexities of that endeavor. Rather than letting this rich collection of experiences evaporate into the chaos of the semester, this SoTL project carved out time for our team to review and analyze student engagement with a difficult dialogue and to understand it in a taxonomy that’s more precise, complex, and fair than our solitary, unchecked assumptions.

While we believe the lesson itself opened up the possibility of a transformational experience for some of the students, the project’s process was unquestioningly transformational for us. By observing others’ classes with such challenging dynamics, we grew even more aware of the precarity of teaching controversial topics and inclusive pedagogies. We saw, for example, how creating inclusive environments for some students (e.g., women) may momentarily “exclude” others (e.g., men), and that these moments of shifting power may manifest as negative evaluations of teaching. Without institutional support, faculty may avoid discussing such power dynamics in the classroom. Further, these fears will be disproportionately borne by minority faculty, who are often tasked with efforts toward inclusion without open acknowledgement that such labor carries risks in achieving traditional measures of professional success (Fan et al. 2019).

For our team members new to SoTL, this project created an opportunity for collaboration in teaching, analysis, and writing that was unlike anything we had done in the past. Our takeaways ranged from the everyday work of good teaching (e.g., always include some low-stakes writing on contentious topics) to institutional interventions (e.g., we need to work with tenure and promotion committees to elevate this work). We thus recommend lesson study projects as an important option in a campus’s faculty development repertoire. Further, as our collective experience suggests, such efforts can reveal the subtle ways broader social and political divisions permeate classroom spaces. In an age of increasing polarization, it may become more common for instructors to feel they’ve failed to stage the kind of difficult, transformative lessons we hope for. Mapping complexity across the class, within individual students, and between written and spoken participation allowed us to puncture the myth that an epiphany must come in the bounded space and time of a single class. We were able to transform our sense of deflation into a more hopeful frame redrawn around intentional lesson design and conducting this study of teaching and learning with colleagues.

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## NOTES

1. We foreground the particularities of our project—its when and where—in keeping with the calls for explicitly acknowledging how SoTL projects emerge from specific contexts (e.g., Blair 2013; Chng and Looker 2013; Felten 2013; Shulman 2014).
2. All student names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Research was approved through the Rollins College institutional review board.

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## APPENDIX

### THE LESSON

#### Pre-Class

*Goals: prime students for class discussion with independent reading and reflection on places of disconnection with the content and how disciplinary frames can help to make sense of unfamiliar or difficult content*

- Sometime before the lesson class period, establish ground rules and a trigger warning about the upcoming discussion.
- Students read “[Sexual Consent on College Campus](#),” and write one paragraph each in response to the prompts below. Tell students they’ll be submitting these responses on the learning management system but will *not* be required to read them in class.
  - One paragraph: Describe one of the comments/excerpts in “[Sexual Consent on College Campus](#)” that you feel *least* connected to, and reflect on why the perspective of that excerpt is harder for you to connect with.
  - One paragraph: How does [the [discipline of the course](#)] help you understand or make sense of “[Sexual Consent on College Campus](#)”?
- A few days before class, students submit to the learning management system, so the instructor can read them before class meeting.

#### In-Class Activities

##### Priming Activity (~20 minutes)

*Goals: to ease into discussion and to surface common narratives, their sources, & the expectations they form*

1. Students write individually for 2 to 3 minutes: “**Where did you get information about sex?**” Tell them they’ll be sharing their thoughts.
2. After 2 to 3 minutes, give them this second prompt for 2 to 3 more minutes of writing: “**Where have you gotten information about the rules of sexual engagement/scripts for sexual contexts?**”
3. Whole-class discussion: call for volunteers to share their responses while instructor lists the sources on board.
  - When relevant, connect this discussion of information and narratives about sexual engagement to pre-class writings on the perspectives they felt least connected to in “[Sexual Consent on College Campus](#).”
  - As the discussion unfolds, prompt students with the following to elaborate further:
    - “**What does ‘information’ mean, then?**”
    - “**What are you noticing about your sources of ‘information’?**” “**What’s missing?**”
    - “**Do all people get the same kinds of information or messages?**” “**What kinds of differences in messages or information might exist, and for whom?**”

##### Safety Activity (~30 minutes)

*Goals: to call attention to asymmetry of safety experiences and information, to make space for identifying and then seeing past the male/female binary of common narratives*

1. Whole-class safety exercise (Katz 2006, 2): Write a vertical line on board, “male” on one side, “female” on other.
2. Ask the men, “**What steps do you take, on a daily basis, to prevent yourselves from being sexually assaulted?**” Call for volunteers to report out. Allow the silences and awkwardness. Write student responses on the board.
3. Ask the women, “**What steps do you take on a daily basis to prevent yourselves from being sexually assaulted?**” Call for volunteers to report out. Write student responses on the board. Note: this side of the board will probably fill up.
4. Whole-class debrief: “**What do you notice?**”
  - After giving students time to identify the asymmetries and the dualistic representation of gendered experiences and (hopefully) to trouble the binary themselves, nudge them with the following prompts:
    - “**So is this something only women need to worry about?**”
    - “**How does racial identity affect this issue?**”
    - “**Are these answers the same for gay men? Or trans people?**”
  - Be intentional about including as many voices participating: “**What about someone from this side of the room?**” “**Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t had a chance yet.**”
5. Shift the large group discussion: “**How does [the discipline of the course] help you understand this discussion?**” During this discussion, refer back to “Sexual Consent on College Campus,” and remind them they wrote about a similar question before class.

Course-Specific Activity (can fill up the rest of the class period, making sure to leave time for the Wrap-Up Activity below)

*Goal: if time, to integrate relevant discipline-appropriate activity in which class builds on the Safety Activity*

Wrap-Up Activity (5 minutes)

*Goals: to provide time to reflect and capture their immediate thinking and feeling, and to help them transition to the rest of their day*

1. Ask students to write their name on a sheet of paper, and then spend 3 minutes responding to the following: “**Right now, what’s foremost in your thoughts about today’s class? What words would you use to describe how you’re feeling?**”
2. Collect these writings before students leave.
3. Give them the post-class assignment on a sheet of paper with the instructions on it, or tell them to look for an email with the instructions right after class.
4. Thank them for their participation in class today.

### Post-Class

- Students write in response to the following, and submit via the learning management system: “**Write a brief reflection (approximately 250 words) about how you experienced today’s class period by responding to any of these prompts:**”
  - **What was most difficult for you in today’s class, and why?**
  - **What surprised you most about your reactions or those of your classmates in today’s class?**

- **What do you think may have been left unspoken--either by yourself or others? What do you make of that silence?**
- **During what moments of class did you feel included? Excluded?**
- **What changes when we talk about this kind of charged topic through the lens of a [course discipline] class?**
- **This semester the campus is also hosting a series of events in conversation with the #MeToo movement. How does your connection to this topic change when you're approaching it through a campus event like a play or a speaker?**



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