

Teaching in Times of Terrorism and War

By Craig Abrahamson

The content areas of the courses that I teach in Social Work and General Education at James Madison University directly relate to understanding human behavior, which opens the door for discussing students' reactions to these events and the continual threat of more terrorism. However, I have been an educator for 24 years, and never have I been challenged to this degree as far as attempting to continue to keep my courses on their correct academic pathway and also be aware of the students' emotional state as it relates to their academic functioning. Several of my students have been directly impacted by family and friends having been injured or killed in the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and these events have had an effect on the dynamics within the classroom. The true challenge for me has been to integrate course content into how these attacks have affected and changed the lives of my students in an attempt to help facilitate maximum learning in this time of terrorism and war.

I will never forget walking into a classroom filled with students at 12:30 p.m. on September 11th and confronting the ways that the attacks had affected their immediate emotional states. Some students were crying, others were frantically attempting to make calls on their cell phones to family members whose safety was in question, while others appeared to be in a daze. My question to myself was, "What do I do now?" I was not in the proper emotional state to lecture and engage students in discussion, but through my own experiences as a psychotherapist, I have learned that when individuals attempt to repress overt emotions that are truly troubling them, the outcome is often one of dysfunctional behavior. I remember telling students that I felt that we needed not to attempt to have a regular class, and that we should share how we were feeling about the morning's events. The discussion lasted the entire class period, and it was the most emotional exchange that I have ever experienced in a classroom.

Another strategy I employed in one course was group discussion. In this particular course one day each week is structured in a group process format. I decided that the topic beginning on September 14th would be the feelings students had about the terrorist attacks. Students totally agreed, and for three consecutive groups sessions these feelings were actively talked about. In these twelve-person groups, students shared their fears, doubts, bewilderment, agony, frustration, and a desire to return to the way things were before the attacks. At the end of our third group session, the students generally indicated that this had been a good opportunity for them to come to terms with how these acts of terrorism had affected them, and that it was time to move on to regular course material and application. One of their assignments was to write a reaction to how these discussions had affected them.

The following reflect their varied reactions:

- ? "We are confused, but we are together in this."
- ? "These discussions give me comfort."
- ? "I am beginning to feel more objective about terrorism...this is good."
- ? "These discussions are really needed in order for me to keep on track with my courses."
- ? "Life has moved on, why keep talking about terrorism...it is over."
- ? "I never realized that normal students could be so emotional, and it really scares me."
- ? "We need to get on with life and stop these silly discussions."
- ? "We jumped into too much depth too fast."
- ? "Let's forget about terrorism and get ready for the World Series."

In conclusion, one of our roles is to help facilitate student learning. Our job has become more complicated due to the reality of terrorism and war as a part of our daily lives, and this reality is not going to go away in the near future. The feedback that I have described from the students who participated in these group discussions indicates that they have different coping strategies within the classroom. As educators we must be sensitive and empathic so that we can "join" each other to accomplish the task of learning. We are humans dealing with our own issues regarding terrorism and

war as well. Also, we must realize that we won't be able to accommodate all students at any given time, and I believe the student's comments support this. We must stay continually aware of how students are being affected by this new reality.