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Confronting campus hate crime through forum theatre methods

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According to Universities UK, hate crimes on campus have a considerable impact on student well-being, academic attainment, retention, institutional reputation and recruitment (UUK, 2016). Their report encouraged a culture of ‘zero tolerance’ and the need for visible and accessible hate crime reporting mechanisms for students. To address this, we were awarded funding by HEFCE to promote student awareness of hate crimes, where to report them and signpost student support. The timing could not have been more prescient. As we were preparing to launch our first session, ‘Campus Hate Crime’ was attracting widespread media attention in the UK, with a spate of high profile incidents targeting BAME students, such as, for example, at Nottingham Trent, Sheffield Hallam, Warwick, and Exeter.

Our approach to the project was one of local partnership, working with our student union (SUBU), Dorset Police, Dorset Police and Crime Commissioner, Dorset Race & Equality Council (DREC), Intercom Trust, CPS Wessex and Access Dorset, to identify clearly what our outcomes should be. We engaged the services of Cornwall-based theatre group Theatre Learning to create campus-based hate crime scenarios to present to the students. These scenarios, in the form of forum theatre, were based on reported cases (not from Bournemouth University) and were acted out by professionals. They reflected situations that students might be exposed to and encouraged them to consider how they might respond. Scenarios were designed to include multiple forms of hate crime strands within an intersectional framework.

Forum Theatre (Boag, 1979) is a drama-based, interactive approach to addressing public issues or working with marginalized groups (Hamel, 2015) and gender-based violence (Mitchell and Freitag, 2011). With a strong emphasis on voice and empowerment it has been successful in generating collaborative dialogue between actor and audience. Our goal was to present scenes of discrimination and hate crimes within a safe public arena, where spectators can become participants and identify, challenge and question the decision-making by ‘characters’ within each scenario.

To date, the project is ongoing and involves 'hate crime awareness' sessions either built into student timetabling or as independent 'campus' events that are promoted through the Equality and Diversity unit at BU. The project continues to engage with new students, most recently during induction week in September 2018, but partial analysis was conducted on student evaluations that were collated after the first events held earlier this (calendar) year. Our provisional findings from 90 participants found that forum theatre had much to offer students, who reported being both impressed and shocked by the method of delivery and the topics under debate.

The students, the majority level four social science undergraduates (71), were asked about their knowledge of hate crime before and after the forum theatre (FT) event, and the impact, if any, that it had on them. More than half of the participants were aged between 18 and 24 (n=76) and identified as female (n=60). Fifty four participants identified themselves as White British, with the remainder Asian, Black, White other, Mixed ethnicity or unknown.

Three main themes emerged from provisional analysis of the impact of the FT method: 1) FT was an informative process which enabled students to know more about recognizing and responding to hate crimes in a 'safe' way; 2) participants felt empowered to recognize and challenge hate crimes following the event; 3) participants reported an emotional impact from the sessions. Comments included: how it "*made me more conscious about people around me and how other people around them could impact the victims*"; "*eye opening, informative, thought provoking*"; "*will be more proactive in challenging hate crimes*"; "*Giving me confidence to report things that are not right*" and "*made me understand that my voice has value and to always speak out and that I matter*". Participants' confidence to be proactive and report hate crime supports the active bystander approach that is encouraged within the FT method. Participants spoke particularly about how the event was "*very powerful*" and "*opened my eyes on how individuals feel*". One participant asked that the sessions to be "*shown to a lot more people*" because of the emotional attachment they had to the characters in the scenarios.

As well as having an emotional and practical impact on participants, the sessions also provided greater knowledge and understanding about hate crimes. Participants emphasized how the use of FT was a "*much better and interactive way*" of learning more, "*a great way of seeing certain examples played out and how we would address it*" and "*the examples were sensitively executed and addressed issues*" that were "*thought provoking*".

Many participants had expected some form of 'interactive event' and reported how the performances achieved this and kept audiences interested in an imaginative way. Three students gleefully wrote how they were expecting to be bored – but were then surprised to report how they gained “a lot of insightful knowledge”, “learnt a lot” and how “my expectations have been exceeded, engaging and informative”. For the majority of participants, the performative nature of FT provided relatable and effective methods of presenting, understanding and responding to hate crimes. Some reported being ‘shocked’ by the method but recognised the value of this as a method of engagement. Participants perceived that FT is a creative way of learning and particularly emphasized that interaction allowed for a “judge free zone” that gave students the confidence to challenge hate crimes in a safe and consenting environment.

Emphatically, we recommend the use of FT as an engaging, effective and safe method of hate crime awareness education. We have made minor amendments to future events to ensure students are confident as to where they can report hate crimes and to provide more time for them to reflect and consider upon solutions to hate crimes, following feedback. We found that those sessions that were directly embedded in teaching timetables had the greatest attendance and therefore the better outcomes and impact. We would strongly encourage ensuring a balanced representation of diversity within the FT scenarios so that all members of the audiences feel they are being represented. Interested readers are encouraged to contact [James Palfreman-Kay](#) or myself to learn more about our project.

References

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