

‘Slippery stuff’: handling sexually explicit materials in the HE classroom

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Biographies

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Abstract

In this paper we examine key issues arising from the inclusion of sexually explicit materials on two final-year undergraduate modules in criminology and sociology. Contextualised through critical self-reflection, we outline and interrogate the strategies employed for sensitively handling the dissemination and discussion of sexually explicit materials. In so doing, we discuss the ethical and legal implications of employing such materials, and highlight some of the problems and paradoxes students face in opening up for critical scrutiny their own opinions, beliefs and embodied experiences of erotic and/or pornographic materials. Finally, we reflect on the extent to which strategic exposure to such materials allows students to develop political and academic critiques that sharpen their understanding of the contested terrain upon which erotica and/or pornography is situated.

Key words: erotica and/or pornography, sex and sexuality, bodies, ethics

Introduction

This paper offers insights into key issues relating to the delivery of two final-year undergraduate modules: 'Bodies in Context' and 'Gender, Sex and Social Control'. Both modules have been devised, taught and assessed by the authors over a number of years. The paper addresses the use of specific source materials, including those that are self-evidently erotic and/or pornographic, to explore and analyse the intersection of textual or graphic depictions of sexualised bodies with academic theories and concepts. It would be naïve to assume that there are no issues arising from the employment of sexually explicit materials on modules dealing specifically with sex, sexuality and the body, and the delivery of such modules is not without problems and paradoxes. That said, the use of sexually explicit material also provides key, and somewhat unique, opportunities to explore and bring to life the contextual reality of theoretical and empirical academic arguments. In drawing upon our experience in situ, this paper identifies some of the opportunities and constraints regarding the handling of sexually explicit material on these modules. It addresses the particular issues that inhere in the strategies we have devised for both the teaching and learning objectives, as well as the assessment elements, on these modules, and subjects these strategies to dialogic, critical self-reflection.

Both final-year modules discussed are year-long, 20-credit modules embedded in different undergraduate awards programmes taught in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Glamorgan, South Wales. 'Bodies in Context' is located in the sociology award scheme and regularly attracts between 30 to 50 students per year. Student cohorts tend to be typically young and white, although each year a small number of mature, international, Black and Asian students enroll. The ratio of women to men has remained fairly consistent over the shelf-life of this module at about 10:1. 'Gender, Sex and Social Control' is located in the criminology award scheme and usually attracts between 60 to 80 students per year. Again, student cohorts tend to be typically young and white, with small numbers of mature, international, Black and Asian students. However, the ratio of women to men for this module has tended to be

about 7:1. Although the modules are located within their own respective fields of sociology and criminology, students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds within the humanities and social sciences are permitted to enroll once they have achieved the necessary pre-requisite(s) at the previous level of the scheme. The modules therefore not only attract students across sociology and criminology, but also from politics and public policy, psychology, education, history, and so on. It should also be noted that the typical intake on humanities and social sciences degree schemes at the University of Glamorgan consists of students who are not high achievers at A level. Indeed, many are Access students and/or are the first in their families to enter higher education.

This paper is not theory-driven, but the discussion that follows is contextualised by means of critical reflection, drawing in particular on one of the author's (SO) published works in this field, and those of others. These critical reflections will be outlined and returned to at appropriate junctures in the sections that follow, offering wider discussion of the particular issues identified. It is over 12 years since SO co-authored (with her colleague Jane Gardner, formerly lecturer in women's studies, University of Glamorgan) a chapter entitled 'Coming in the classroom: explicitly sexualized lesbian and gay representations in the academy' (Gardner and Oerton, 1997). The chapter explored the ways in which secure as well as dangerous and/or forbidden spaces for the interactive viewing of sexually charged lesbian and gay representations operated in classroom settings with diverse student bodies. It discussed the authors' selection, handling of and responses to homoerotic and/or pornographic materials, concentrating particularly on those taught sessions in which explicitly sexualised photographs were used to generate discussion of the sociopolitical and discursive constituting of same-sex desires. It was argued that the exploration and analysis of such materials in the social sciences curriculum was designed to be vital and imaginative, stimulating and subversive. The central aim, however, was to interrogate the 'stiff silences' that surrounded the use of sexually explicit materials in the classroom. That said, it is clear that much has changed in the decade or so since that chapter was published, not least the

knowledge and understanding of sex, sexuality and bodies that students now bring to bear on their degree studies. This is highly likely a consequence of broader changes in the last decade or so, not only with regard to the increased availability of erotic and/or pornographic material (in terms of both the amount and the different forms and types it takes) and the increased accessibility of such material, but also the way in which sexually explicit material has seeped into and permeated mainstream culture. Indeed, much has been written about the increased sexualisation of society, the increasing commodification of sex and sexual desire, and what could amount to a cultural shift labelled variously 'pornification', 'pornographication', 'pornication', 'porno-chic', and so on (see, for example, Attwood, 2006, 2009; Levy, 2005; McNair, 2002; Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa, 2006). Clearly, changes in attitudes (and exposure) to sex, sexualities and material of a sexual nature within the wider social world will transpose into classroom settings insofar as they will be reflected in students' responses to those issues and relevant to the discussions that ensue.

Outline of teaching and learning strategies employed

This section of the paper outlines the teaching and learning objectives in relation to the use of sexually explicit source materials (whether in the medium of photography, film or literature, or in the form of illustrations, drawings, animation and so forth) in the modules in question, before turning to a discussion of some of the opportunities and constraints that have arisen in the strategies employed for teaching and learning on these modules. One of the teaching and learning objectives for 'Bodies in Context' is that students engage in a critical analysis of contemporary debates around art, erotica and pornography, applying a range of theories to explicitly sexual texts or items, selected by SO as module leader. Insofar as there is scope to focus on the application of theory to the specific 'realities' of sexually explicit material, the teaching and learning strategies employed on this module render the task of content delivery much less abstract and disembodied than is usually the case. More crucially, the intention is for particular texts or items to act as an anchor or

hook to illustrate or counter the various theories, including moral conservatism, liberalism, liberal feminism and radical feminism, which students meet on the module.

Some examples of how sexually explicit materials are chosen for their efficacy in allowing students to interrogate these various theories will suffice here. In terms of exploring 'other' pornographies, including those for self-styled 'sexual outlaws', teaching delivery makes use of some of Robert Mapplethorpe's (1992) work, including some of his sadomasochistic, homoerotic photographs, a number of which have been subject to (unsuccessful) attempts at censorship in both the USA and the UK. A number of Mapplethorpe's photographic plates, including the infamous Jessie McBride (Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, 1976), are shown to students in both lectures and seminars in order to act as a starting point for discussions of legal and judicial distinctions between 'aesthetic' and 'obscene' bodies. Consideration is also given to what the implications might be for feminist theories, particularly more radical feminist perspectives, in the case of sexual genres such as that represented by Mapplethorpe's work. Other examples of homoerotic pornography, such as the lesbian erotic fiction of Pat Califia (1988) and lesbian photography edited by Bright and Posener (1996), are also drawn upon to contextualise other theoretical arguments such as the liberal feminist contention that certain forms of pornography play a distinct role which is not against the interests of all women. In addition, the use of such sexually explicit materials in classroom settings helps point students to what is required for the assessment element of this module, as will become more apparent later in this paper.

While the teaching and learning objectives for 'Bodies in Context' clearly necessitate the use of 'real' art, pornography and other sexually explicit material, the need to include and use such material within the module 'Gender, Sex and Social Control', taught by JN, is less obviously linked to the elements of assessment for this module. However, the module's wider objectives are to provide students with a historical, sociopolitical and critical understanding of the

gendered and sexualised nature of social control. It aims to illustrate the way in which concepts of gender, sex and sexuality have been socially constructed and represented over time, evidenced by forms of media such as literature, film, art and photography. Essentially, the module attempts to untangle the way in which representations of men and women, masculinities and femininities, and sex and sexualities have mediated our understandings of crime, criminality and victimisation in contemporary society. In doing so, the content covers various themes, aside from pornography, which could be construed as being of a sexually sensitive and/or controversial nature, including rape, paedophilia, genital mutilation, human trafficking, sex work, and so on. As such, although there is only one lecture and two seminar sessions (one which specifically employs the use of 'real' art, erotica and pornography) devoted to pornography per se, links to sexually explicit material are raised in many other lectures: for example, in lectures discussing the use of sexualised bodies in advertising; sexual and/or sexually violent themes raised in musical lyrics/videos; sexual abuse and child pornography; rape; even depictions of men, women, masculinities and femininities as found in religion and philosophy. The use of 'real' sexually explicit material, and the contextual relevance of this material for the module as a whole, is therefore crucial.

In both modules, the inclusion of sexually explicit material is designed to be thought-provoking, challenging and interesting for students. Students on both modules are also encouraged to deal with issues that may be stimulating, provocative, transgressive and/or shocking for them. The personal-political involvement of students is seen as crucial, and it is felt that this is better achieved when students actively engage with the actual subject matter at the heart of the academic discourses and debates they encounter on these modules. One underlying aim is that students make concrete, empirical 'realities' come to life by means of systematic engagement with and theoretical analysis of both contemporary and retrospective sexually explicit material. By drawing upon 'real' art, erotica and pornography, academic debates, arguments and concepts are grasped and grappled with in a way not possible when relying

simply on theoretical discourse. As an index of this, it is clear that concepts such as 'objectification' and 'dehumanisation' can be somewhat abstract terms until students are presented with specific examples of 'real' art, erotica and pornography, which they can then attempt to deconstruct and pick apart their possible subtext(s).

This can be illustrated by how, in 'Gender, Sex and Social Control', students are presented with a black and white image of a female model. She wears a stringed crop top and knickers, her hands on her hips, with trickles of sweat running down her body. In discussing the image, students raise issues such as representations of the body in terms of body image and ideals, body posture and pose, techniques of photography, the use of colour versus black and white photography, and the impact that these issues have upon whether an image is art, erotica or porn. In student discussions, it is argued that black and white images invariably make the image more 'artistic', and this image is definitely felt to be 'just' erotica – something students would have found on their/their brother's wall as a young teenager. Indeed, students tend to point out the model's unusually large hands and her impeccable manicure, long before they notice that she has no head. That her face is not depicted, and that the shot is taken from her shoulders to her thighs, is not the immediate reference point for students. In short, the image is of breasts, crotch, hands: parts of a woman, but not a woman. This clearly provides an excellent opportunity to illustrate and discuss the concept of objectification, and, from there, the concept of dehumanisation. Such vivid examples of the meaning of such concepts are perhaps simply not so forthcoming when reliance is placed on theoretical discourse alone.

Similarly, the use of 'real' art, erotica and pornography can elucidate much wider arguments and debates, which otherwise might remain intangible. For example, 'Bodies in Context' addresses the complex interrelationship between gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity by focusing on the dehumanisation and enslavement of the Hottentot Venus in the early nineteenth century. Such a

focus upon early 'pornographic' representations of Black African (and Oriental) women acts to illustrate wider critiques of bourgeois and colonial imaginings and perverse longings for the exotic 'other' (Alloula, 2000), thereby permitting students to engage in a 'real' way with complex theoretical positions around these racialised and sexualised bodies. A further example relates to the 'porn causes rape' debate. It may be difficult to grasp the heated arguments in this debate, particularly for students who have not been exposed to certain forms of erotica and/or pornography. On the one hand, students may not be aware of the graphically explicit material available which depicts sexual and physical abuse, torture, rape and so on, and the levels of violence that are present in such material. There may therefore be a tendency to dismiss claims that 'porn causes rape' as extreme, unrealistic and/or the rantings of overly zealous radical feminists. On the other hand, students may perceive the majority or all of erotica and/or pornography to be of a sexually violent, degrading and/or misogynistic nature. In this instance, they could take a position in the 'porn causes rape' debate based on such an assumption without considering that a great deal of such material might be considered to depict non-violent, non-degrading, consensual and mutually pleasurable sexual behaviour. Thus, by viewing the actual material under discussion and the different range of sexual behaviours and power structures it can depict, the intention is to encourage students to think more critically and in a more informed manner.

In addition, it is important to recognise that using 'real' art, erotica and pornography in the classroom is likely to give rise to strong views and emotionally charged reactions, whether these are arousal, stimulation, amusement, discomfort, anger, offence, disgust and/or distress. However, student reactions can often be pivotal in classroom discussions, providing useful opportunities to explore and unravel their emotional responses and how these link to different theoretical positions and perspectives. Sexually explicit material can thus stimulate a reaction that can be channelled, allowing students to identify their own position within a particular argument or debate. Having said this, student reactions to sexually explicit materials can also give rise to difficult

issues that require much sensitivity, as discussed in greater detail later. Thus, one must gauge student responses very carefully and decide whether it is appropriate and/or ethical to delve deeper into student's reactions or whether the direction of the discussion should be gently changed at any given time.

Legal and ethical issues

Clearly, exposing students to 'real' representations of sexualised bodies and sexual behaviour involves dealing with legal and ethical issues that must be negotiated and managed. Perhaps of greatest concern when engaging students with sexually explicit material is that students do not break the law when, for example, they access and view 'live' pornography in the context of their studies. Blurred boundaries and definitional problems abound when dealing with material of a sexually explicit nature, and distinguishing between that which may be transgressive, deviant and illicit and that which is illegal is not so clear-cut. The precarious legal situation surrounding pornography has been compounded by recent legislation regarding possession of what is termed 'extreme pornography'. While various Obscene Publications Acts (1857, 1959, 1967) criminalised the publication and distribution of certain material, possession of pornography (other than that involving a child) was not an offence. However, the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (2008) (part 5, section 63) created a new offence which criminalised possession of 'an extreme pornographic' image. An image is deemed to be extreme if it 'is grossly offensive, disgusting or otherwise of an obscene character' and:

It portrays, in an explicit and realistic way, any of the following:

(a) an act which threatens a person's life

(b) an act which results, or is likely to result, in serious injury to a person's anus, breasts or genitals

(c) an act which involves sexual interference with a human corpse, or

(d) a person performing an act of intercourse or oral sex with an animal (whether dead or alive) and a reasonable person looking at the image would think that any such person or animal was real.

On the surface, it may appear that such legislation is relatively straightforward. However, there are a number of problems that affect the clarity of such legislation. Clearly, terms used in the Act, such as 'grossly offensive', 'disgusting' and 'obscene', are open to subjective interpretation. Furthermore, what is deemed to be 'life-threatening' and what constitutes 'serious injury' are not defined and are left to the discretion of the magistrate or jury to decide. Nor is it clear who or what constitutes a 'reasonable person' (Ministry of Justice, 2008, 2009). Perhaps more important for our purposes is the ambiguity surrounding what actually constitutes 'possession' of such material, and whether simply viewing such material and imagery online, without necessarily downloading and/or saving it to an electronic device such as a PC, amounts to 'possession' of that material. Essentially the issue here is that, when viewing websites online, the data from those websites, including images and so forth, are automatically copied and stored in the form of 'temporary internet files' and 'cache directories'. Suffice it to say that there has been a great deal of debate, both in the UK and overseas, over whether images stored in the cache constitute 'possession' (see, for example, Clough, 2008; Marin, 2008).

This is not just an issue that faces students, but also those delivering modules that employ the use of 'real' art, erotica and pornography. In 'Gender, Sex and Social Control', one of the issues raised is the relationship between sex, aggression and death, and how these themes are present in sexually explicit material. To illustrate this, a number of websites are referred to, including necrobabes.com, torture.net and breast-torture.net. While it was not felt necessary to actually show any of the films and footage, the sites themselves were accessed. The immediate images and imagery they contained, the titles of the items available and the sheer amount of material available adequately conveyed to students the nature of such material. However, since the

introduction of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (2008), the legality of even accessing such sites, particularly for student consumption, is now highly questionable and could leave lecturers (and their academic institutions) open to possible prosecution for the possession of 'extreme pornography'. This is further complicated in terms of the risks and responsibilities of such 'offending' by the regulations governing computer use to which all users (staff and students) give their compliance when they log on to the University of Glamorgan's computing facilities.

Aside from legal and regulatory issues, there are also ethical issues that need to be addressed both at an institutional level and in terms of the ethical responsibilities we have for our students. Any taught module that is provided by an academic institution must identify content that could be construed as being of a sensitive and/or controversial nature and thus ethically problematic. In order to gain ethical approval, taught modules must be mindful of university ethics guidelines. Ethics committees must be satisfied that inclusion of such content is academically justified. As has been argued, the inclusion and employment of sexually explicit material in the classroom can be justified by the fact that it provides a unique opportunity to explore and understand abstract theories and academic arguments 'in the flesh'. However, the extent to which inclusion of any given individual item of art, erotica or pornography can be justified as being necessary, as opposed to gratuitous (for example, in terms of sexually violent content), is far more difficult. This is a subjective rather than an objective exercise; in other words, it is always a matter of debate and is likely to be contested. As lecturers, however, we have a duty of care to students, which could be considered in many ways as being similar to the ethical principles involved in conducting research, in terms of 'informed consent' and 'avoidance of harm'.

In an attempt to gain 'informed consent', and thereby avoiding 'harming' them, students are made aware of the nature of the material that they will be exposed to and/or expected to engage with throughout the course of both modules. For

example, in 'Gender, Sex and Social Control', the module proforma, which provides a synopsis of the module's content, aims, learning objectives and assessment elements and is available to students to consult prior to making their module choices, contains a cautionary warning to students (see item 1 below). This warning is reiterated to students at the beginning of the module and prior to any specific lectures and seminars which relate to particularly controversial and/or sensitive topics. Similarly, in 'Bodies in Context', students are advised before teaching commences that the module might contain material which they may find offensive and they are told that they are under no direct obligation to view or read it. However, in the case of their avoiding some texts, particularly the essential reading by Cornell (2000), Spector (2006) and Williams (2003), choosing not to engage with module materials is undoubtedly problematic. In addition, straddling the borders between the criminal and illicit clearly raises definitional wrangles and debates over what constitutes pornography, erotica and/or art. The paradox here is that issuing cautionary warnings, such as those exemplified above, suggests that it is possible to have a clear notion of what constitutes 'adult pornography', 'child pornography' and 'abusive', 'exploitative' and/or 'extreme' images. But, at the same time, an argument addressed by both modules is that distinguishing between these supposedly distinct 'categories' of sexually illegal and illicit material is extremely problematic and subject in part to individual interpretation.

[ITEM 1 TO BE INSERTED HERE]

The final focus in this section is on some of the further ethical issues that arise in relation to student handling of and reactions to sexually explicit materials and the duty of care that we as lecturers have for our students. As Harrison and Miller (2001) have noted, self-revelation can be personally challenging and emotionally fraught for students. They argue that for academic staff to have access to intimate aspects of students' lives is problematic, and that this can create difficulties for staff who may feel ill-qualified to deal with or offer individual support in the face of what are often emotionally painful reactions to,

for example, explicit scenes of sexual violence. HE classroom settings are generally promoted as 'safe' spaces rather than dangerous or threatening ones. Sexual pleasures, appetites and tastes, not least those associated with voyeurism and consumption of sexually explicit materials, are not easily negotiated by students and staff in the classroom, since such phenomena, although clearly social, are often embedded in our private fantasy lives rather than our shared public personas. In short, it is risky for students and staff to get visibly distressed and/or 'turned on' in the HE classroom. In terms of self-protection then, there is a need for both students and staff to employ some means of emotional distancing in these modules, particularly from what might be deemed very sexually stimulating and/or violent and abusive items(s).

Not surprisingly, it has proved necessary over the years to suggest to students that they emotionally 'pad up' before they expose themselves to some of the more violent and abusive sexually explicit material they may come across in their own research and reading around the area, particularly their search for appropriate items upon which to base their written coursework assessments. There are only so many images of young looking women/girls with semen splattered over their faces and so forth that we as staff and students might ordinarily chose to expose ourselves to. Indeed, some students clearly have been angered, sickened and/or disturbed by the easy availability of widespread sexual violence, albeit representational. It is also the case that even some of the recommended module readings elicit strong negative reactions from students in terms of their sexually graphic content. For example, an extract in which Dworkin (1981: 167–174) rescripts Georges Bataille's erotic-pornographic novel, 'Story of the Eye', is required reading for discussion of her radical feminist position on porn masquerading under the guise of the high art aesthetic. Some students have found even this 'academic' writing highly unpalatable. Furthermore, some lesbian s/m depictions such as those found in Bright and Posener (1996) and Della Grace (1991) have been greeted with distaste by some students, even those sympathetic to liberal and libertarian theories (see Dunn, 1990). Cautionary warnings and attempts to ensure that

students are made aware of the possible offensive and/or upsetting nature of some material may be employed. However, students may not react to this material in the way that they expect to nor, therefore, be prepared for their emotional responses when they do.

This is a particularly acute concern when considering those students who may have had direct personal experience with and be survivors of sexual violence themselves. As indicated in item 1, if students are distressed by any of the issues raised on these modules, the cautionary warnings included in module handbooks provide advice and guidance on various support systems that are in place, including the University's Counselling and Advice Service (<http://couselling.glam.ac.uk>). They are also directed to further information on these services in our award handbooks and on Blackboard sites. Indeed, both authors have had experience of students making personal disclosures in classroom settings, written assessments or through personal exchanges during staff–student meetings of particular aspects of their own life experiences that have hitherto remained buried or unaddressed. This is considered, for the most part, to be a very positive reflection of the opportunities afforded by these modules, which have allowed students to 'speak out' and open up in very personal ways. As an index, many students speak on module evaluation feedback forms of finding their experience of these modules insightful and even cathartic, but some clearly wrestle with issues of trust and safety, including, for example, occasionally requesting that their (albeit anonymous) written assessments are not read by anyone else, including external examiners. As such, personal disclosures can give rise to difficult and fraught issues of power and control, including how far and in what ways staff and students are responsible for addressing sexual guilt, regret and/or remorse, or for apportioning blame for sexual violence and abuse. Without doubt, we have a duty of care to students, to support those who may have felt that they could cope with whatever reactions these particular modules elicited in them only to discover that they are struggling with uncomfortable, painful and distressing

revelations. In all this, the ethics and politics of ‘troubling’ emotions are deeply embedded in these modules.

Outline of assessment elements

The challenges and opportunities discussed thus far are no less implicated in the assessment elements for these modules. As explained earlier, the assessment requirement for ‘Bodies in Context’ involves students selecting one or more items of sexually explicit material and critically applying theories met on the module to those item(s). The pornography project that students submit as an assessed element (50 per cent of total) as part of this module demands, in addition to their academic engagement, a personal–political involvement on students’ part, particularly in terms of their ‘owning’ the source material used. All source material must be clearly appendicised so that it can be drawn upon as a supporting resource for the critical analysis that carries the weight of the assessment. The instructions given to students for this element of assessment are reproduced as item 2 below.

[ITEM 2 TO BE INSERTED HERE]

With regard to ‘Gender, Sex and Social Control’, the assessment requirements do not revolve solely around the issue of pornography, erotica and other sexually explicit material. As part of the coursework assessment (50 per cent of total), students must choose one of five possible questions to attempt. Only two of the questions specifically relate to ‘pornography’, and even if students answer these two questions, it could be argued that they need not necessarily engage with ‘real’ art, erotica and/or pornography to produce work of an academically excellent nature. However, students will often integrate the debates and issues that surround sexually explicit material into their responses across the full range of questions. The assessment criteria and set questions are outlined in item 3 below.

[ITEM 3 TO BE INSERTED HERE]

In meeting the requirements of the assessments for both modules, students draw upon a variety of items. These include 'high culture' artistic and literary source materials with sexually explicit themes and sometimes involving homoerotic, adolescent and/or pre-pubescent depictions of naked or semi-clad bodies, contemporary art house/coffee table items, top-shelf, heterosexual 'soft core' magazines, sexually explicit advertising, mail order catalogues for sex toys, documentaries on sex, niche-market items and specialist websites. Students select 'adult content' items to refer to, including mainstream and/or art house films and DVDs. Some of the more 'adult content' items can depict young looking models or scenes from 'hard core' pornographic films and DVDs depicting forced and coercive sex, rape, sexual murder and so on. The vast majority of the items sourced by students are easily and freely available, some of them housed in the university library and many of them obtainable via high street shops and, unsurprisingly, the internet. The use of these items is largely judged by the extent to which they enable students to undertake sophisticated theoretical analyses, although we do not underestimate the extent to which such personal–political exposure to these varied and 'real' representations of sexual pleasure and sexual violence impact on students. But it is important to be clear that marking criteria for elements of assessment on these modules do not differ greatly from those for other forms of coursework assessment, so that knowledge and understanding, construction of lines of argument, evidence of wider research and the level of critical analysis all determine the eventual mark and feedback given to students. Adopting this relatively standard academic approach to delivery and assessment on these modules is not to downplay some of the problems and paradoxes that are inevitably encountered.

Problems and paradoxes

Although students voice varied responses to their employment and enjoyment (or absence of enjoyment) of sexually explicit materials on the two modules,

their evaluations of both 'Bodies in Context' and 'Gender, Sex and Social Control' as a whole are generally enthusiastic and positive. Module evaluation forms and informal verbal feedback highlight their lack of familiarity with teaching, learning and assessment strategies of this kind. Students have also indicated that they welcome the academic, political and personal challenges that confronting sexually explicit material 'in the flesh' brings. With regard to the pornography project assessment in 'Bodies in Context', the wide choice offered within the assessment instructions and guidelines allows students to select (within limits) whatever items of art, erotica and/or pornography they choose. This means that they can not only explore particular interests but can also demonstrate their ability to delve into, and subject to critical interrogation, their taken-for-granted assumptions about sex, sexuality and the sexualised body and, in terms of 'Gender, Sex and Social Control', the links these have to social control, criminal justice, criminality and victimisation. Indeed, the best pieces of work produced for assessments dealing with sexually explicit material have been empirically dense and theoretically rich, with the strongest students engaging in academically-informed analyses of the issues raised and the source materials collected and discussed.

That said, there are difficulties here. Weaker students tend to fall into descriptive and anecdotal modes of enquiry, rather than contextualising and analysing their source materials in a theoretically sophisticated manner. There is also a tendency for some students to take up somewhat unproblematic positions in relation to, for example, choice, consent and coercion. This means that they are unable to undertake nuanced interrogations of the extent to which and ways in which producers and consumers of erotica and/or pornography are implicated in gendered and sexualised power relations that perpetuate abuse. For example, some students seem unable to grasp that those featured in many erotic and/or pornographic representations may be non-consenting and/or vulnerable adults; instead, students tend to fall back on simple readings which rest on liberal notions of freedom, liberty and individual choice. This is despite having been introduced to accounts such as those of Linda Lovelace and other

porn models who have repudiated any notion of acting from positions of freedom and choice and before any consideration is given to those who are powerless to control the dissemination of sexually explicit material which was non-consensual at the point it was made. For some students, then, if sexually explicit materials depict sexual pleasure and enjoyment, they are automatically assumed to be consensual. Hence, the opportunities offered by these teaching, learning and assessment strategies for students to connect their own responses to sexually explicit material and locate them within the various theoretical perspectives were lost on some of the weaker students.

A further paradox when utilising 'real' art, erotica and pornography in the HE classroom is handling students' reactions to sexually explicit material, particularly when they find it emotionally charged. Initially, it can often be difficult to engage students in a meaningful and productive manner. Students may feel uneasy and nervous discussing sexually explicit material, and it may be necessary to overcome the 'stiff silences' identified and remarked upon by Gardner and Oerton (1997) over 12 years ago. This raises issues of how we might try to best engage with student wariness and unease, and enable them to go beyond the material itself and look at its possible subtext. This can be achieved by a 'gentle' introduction. For example, in 'Bodies in Context', the first sexual materials that students encounter are taken from the paintings and sketches of Edgar Degas, which, on the surface, appear to be 'non-threatening' items that do not contain any obvious violence or degradation (see Adhemar and Cachin, 1974). However, it should be noted that students tend not to publicly admit having any difficulties with 'aesthetic' sexual art for fear of looking prudish, conservative and 'uncool'. This may be even more the case today, given the 'porn culture' we are said to be living in highlighted at the outset of the paper.

Indeed, student reactions can often be masked by humour, and there can be benefits and drawbacks to this. A humorous response can elicit a more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, enabling students to feel more comfortable – both

with the material they are viewing and their confidence and ability to discuss this material openly with those present. However, it is important that such a response is quickly channelled back into an academic discussion; otherwise, there is a significant risk of minimising what can be very serious issues surrounding sexually explicit material and sexual exploitation and/or violence. Indeed, the humorous response can be turned in on itself and used to underline disturbing aspects that are initially found funny. For example, pornographic illustrations and anime porn which depict well-known cartoon characters such as Ariel the Mermaid, Sponge-Bob Square Pants, The Fantastic Four, Scooby Doo and Mystery Inc engaging in sexual activity are mostly met with laughter. However, when students are reminded of arguments that pornography can be used to pressurise *adult* sexual partners to engage in sexual behaviours they are uncomfortable with, the more disturbing elements of pornography involving characters from children's cartoons, and the way this could be used with children, become quite clear: Snow White does this; Snow White is having fun; Snow White likes this. Interestingly, the recent legislation regarding 'extreme' pornography does not cover textual material or animated depictions, only photography/images. Yet such depictions can be far more graphic and much more violent than 'real' images, in that, for example, acts can be depicted which are physically impossible. In short, the type of pornographic material that can be produced in textual and particularly in animated form is limited only by the imagination.

Concluding remarks

It is over ten years since 'Coming in the classroom' was published (Gardner and Oerton, 1997). In that time, there have been considerable changes in relation to the difficulties identified of teaching students on modules dealing with gendered and sexualised bodies. Perhaps because of the huge growth of readily available, sexually explicit materials and the much greater openness and widespread acknowledgement that 'sex is everywhere', students in the first decade of the twenty-first century appear to be much more familiar with and

relaxed about expressing both their delight and their difficulties in studying these topics. However, this paper has demonstrated that there are still a number of problems and paradoxes to be taken into account when providing students with the type of teaching, learning and assessment opportunities outlined here. Notwithstanding this, neither staff nor students should be deterred from engaging with the challenges afforded by exploration of these issues. For those dealing in the academic field of bodies, sex and sexuality, it is clear that there are no hard and fast rules about how to proceed and, to an extent, it is always a matter of sailing into uncharted waters. Mistakes, omissions and shortcomings will inevitably get made. But, with each passing year, students may become, if not altogether more confident and assured, a little less confused and more enlightened and comfortable with subjecting themselves and their taken-for-granted ideas about sexually explicit materials to academic scrutiny. As such, there cannot be, nor should there be, any avoidance of erotica and/or pornography in HE classroom settings.

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Item 1: Cautionary note included on module proforma

Please note: it should be clear that some of the issues discussed in this module are of a sensitive and controversial nature. These will be recurrent – in lecture presentations and seminar discussions. Students should consider whether they might find such material offensive and whether they would be comfortable discussing these themes when making module choices.

If you are affected by any of the issues covered by the module then please be aware of the various support systems that the university has that might be of benefit including the Counselling and Advice Service (<http://counselling.glam.ac.uk>). These are fully outlined in the BSc Criminology Award Handbook, which is available on our Criminology Community Blackboard site.

Item 2: 'Pornography project' guidelines

This assessment consists of a 3,000 word 'Pornography project'. The requirement is that you take one or more items of art, erotica or pornography and critically assess the various theoretical perspectives that can be used to throw light upon that particular item(s). By 'item(s)' is meant one or more pieces of sexually explicit, embodied representation(s). You may select sexually explicit representations of women's bodies OR men's bodies OR lesbian/gay men's bodies OR children's bodies* OR virtual-cartoon bodies. As such, you must focus your discussion around a single form of textual representation (for example, either literature, film/video, magazines, CDs, paintings, photography, advertisements, the internet) but in so doing you must critically engage with the wider theoretical and political issues that are raised. This means that in the case of whatever item(s) you have selected, you will have to frame your 'Pornography project' in terms of comparing and contrasting the different theoretical perspectives that have informed the debates surrounding particular item(s). Depending upon the item(s) you have selected, you will be expected to discuss issues of censorship and control, power and violence, the commercialisation, fragmentation and objectification of sexualised bodies and other themes met on the module. You might also need to consider what the differences are between art, erotica and pornography. It may also be necessary to pay some attention to historical changes over the last two centuries. We will discuss the 'Pornography project' in seminars and you will be given guidance on how to organise your work in a systematic way.

* In the case of selecting item(s) depicting sexually explicit images of children, please come and discuss this with me first.

Item 3: Coursework Assessment for 'Gender, Sex and Social Control'

One 3,000 word essay (50%) demonstrating a sound understanding of one of the key themes raised in the module, and a critical awareness of the structural and sociopolitical context within which it is set.

Please answer one of the following questions:

1. Critically discuss the ways in which women's sexuality has been socially controlled and the relevance this has for traditional theories of female criminality.
2. Critically evaluate the ways in which representations of men and/or women have affected the way in which we view them as offenders and/or victims.
3. Pornography causes rape. Discuss.
4. Feminist advocacy of the censorship of porn is: 'another attempt at controlling women's sexuality, only worse because this time it comes under the name of so-called female liberation' (Sccally, 1996:74). Discuss.
5. Drawing upon the example of either a) male rape, or b) rape in the context of war, critically discuss the extent to which the concept of masculinity/masculinities can contribute to explanations of rape.