

Myths and Moral Panics: An Active Learning Approach to Controversial Topics

**Karen A. Mason, Ph.D., Lisa T. Briggs, Ph.D.,
Western Carolina University**

Authors' Contact Information

*Karen A. Mason, Ph.D.
and
Lisa T. Briggs, Ph.D.
Associate Professors
Western Carolina University
Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
413 Belk Building, Cullowhee, NC 28723
Phone: 828.227.2814
email: kmason@email.wcu.edu
email: lbriggs@email.wcu.edu*

Abstract:

Active learning strategies may overcome some of the weaknesses of other pedagogical approaches when addressing controversial topics. This paper explains some of the challenges to instructors when they are presenting information to the class on the divisive topics of crime myths and moral panics and then dealing with the students responses. Active learning techniques found effective in pedagogical research and best teaching practices are discussed and specific examples addressing controversial crime topics are provided. The paper concludes with a discussion of how instructors may better manage disruption caused by emotional student responses to contentious topics.

Key Words:

Crime Myths, Moral Panics, Active Learning, Controversial Topics, Student Resistance.

Introduction

Teaching criminal justice and criminology presents an opportunity to discuss a host of controversial issues that are on the political and social “hot seat”. Like many of our colleagues in other social science fields, we often find students reluctant to discuss “heated” topics in class. Although not all students are equally inhibited, our efforts to initiate active learning on these topics often provoke uncomfortable silence, unthinking responses, or uncontrolled emotional rants. The roots of these classroom challenges lie in the reluctance of students to address controversial topics, such as the crime myths and moral panics that frame most public perceptions about crime and crime policy.

While the education field has provided strategies to encourage discussion on controversial topics, there has been less focus on criminal justice specifically, and practically nothing focused on student reluctance and misconceptions developed by the perpetuation of crime myths (Payne & Gaaney, 2000). In this paper, we discuss the challenges associated with student reluctance when confronted with crime myths and offer examples of active learning techniques that help facilitate student outcomes such as critical thinking. First, we present a brief discussion of moral panics and crime myths and explain why students may be unwilling or hesitant to participate in discussions and other forms of active learning. Second, we discuss challenges to teaching controversial topics followed by examples of active learning techniques that work to overcome student hesitation when confronted with crime myths and moral panics common in the field of criminal justice and criminology. And last, we briefly review how to confront disruption caused by inappropriate emotional responses.

Myths and Panics

What is a crime myth and how do these myths affect classroom instruction? A crime myth is not very different from a traditional myth. In general, a myth is understood to be a traditional story with some historical basis that explains some practice, belief, or event. While these are fictional tales, they most often reveal underlying ideals about a particular culture or people. According to Kappeler and Potter (2005).

Crime myths are usually created in a nonscientific forum through the telling of sensational stories...The fiction in crime myth comes not from the fabrication of events but from the transformation and distortion of those events into social and political problems....The power of crime myths comes from their seemingly natural explanations of crime. Crime myths can shape our thoughts about and reactions to almost any issue related to criminal justice (p.2).

Crime myths are powerful constructions of reality because they address values and beliefs. Myths help to organize one’s views on crime and criminal justice policy. They also frame our identification of certain social issues as crime, develop our views of justice and help select solutions to crimes (Kappeler & Potter, 2005).

Individuals often accept crime myths without even realizing it. Because of the development of communication technologies and the availability of a variety of media sources citizens are given numerous sensationalized messages about crime at a rapid pace. Unfortunately, most of what is known about the status of any given criminal justice

topic at any given time by the general public, including newer undergraduates, is the product of media, news, and even government sources that have goals other than simply conveying the facts. It is not surprising that students are unenthusiastic; even resistant, to instruction and discussion focused on debunking what they believe to be reality regarding issues of crime and criminal justice. It can be even more disturbing for them to accept that crime policy can be based on sensationalized events.

Similar to myths, moral panics shape students' worldviews, but in a much broader sense. There are two essential definitions of moral panics. The first is from Cohen (2004), who first introduced and popularized the term:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of panic is quite novel and other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long lasting repercussions. (p. 1).

While Cohen does not say exactly what he means by a "panic," he clearly is indicating the conventional understanding as a sudden feeling of alarm by a number of individuals followed by an extravagant effort to achieve security. While both definitions emphasize the qualities of disproportion, exaggeration, and alarm, more important for the purposes of understanding visceral and steadfast views of undergraduates is the definition of Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, and Clarke (1978) in *Policing the Crisis*:

When the official reaction to a person, groups of person or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when 'experts', in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threats in all but identical terms, and appear to talk 'with one voice' of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress 'sudden and dramatic' increases (in numbers involved or events) and 'novelty' above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of ...a moral panic (p. 16).

Here, the power of consensus is included as students, understandably, adhere more fervently to official reactions because they are mixed with threats to religious beliefs, the traditional family, and middle-class values. Furthermore, according to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) moral panics are "characterized by the feeling...that evildoers pose a threat to the society and to the moral order as a consequence of their behavior and, therefore, 'something should be done' about them and their behavior (p.31). The penetrating validation of moral panics poses a significant challenge to instructors since we are "upsetting the applecart" when presenting information that proves deep-rooted sentiments and partial worldviews to be the product of sensationalism.

Student Resistance

Our understandings of some difficulties concerning the participation of students in active learning activities about controversial topics are a product of our joint efforts to diversify classroom instruction. We are consistently attempting to move from “the sage on stage” instruction model to a model that encompasses more active and cooperative learning strategies. Our ideas about student reluctance also come from many conversations about myths and panics, about relationships among students, and about the culture of our particular educational institution. We present three general areas that cause most student resistance to active classroom participation: peer relationships, power differences in the classroom, and perceptions based on a norm versus other moral dichotomy (Hedley & Markowitz, 2001; Lusk & Weinberg, 1994).

Peer Relationships

The most feared entity in the classroom is not the professor or the test, but the classmate. Student relationships include those of friends, enemies, peers, teammates, sorority sisters, fraternity brothers, and potential romantic partners. The density of these relationships may vary depending on whether students live on or near campus and whether they are enrolled full time or part time. At institutions where traditional students who live on or near campus dominate the student body, there will be more significant investment in relationships outside the classroom. Furthermore, concerns about their relationships may take precedence over their concerns about their roles in the class and may create reluctance to say anything in class that might jeopardize their relationships or negatively influence future encounters (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994). To address student resistance to active learning exercises, it is necessary to begin the semester or term proactively with actions that help students recognize the tensions created by multiple relationship roles (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994). Instructors may approach student reluctance to participate through introductory exercises, by enthusiastically recognizing those students who answer questions and debate viewpoints, or by making participation a part of the grading system.

Power Differences

Perceptions of power differences, whether actual or not, also reduce discussions of myths and moral panics. Many students experience the teacher as the “expert” who is there to show them the way and deposit facts and truths into students’ heads. According to Innes (2007):

Our students come to the university with many years of training in listening passively and answering brief questions from the teachers with correct answers. Teachers rarely ask students how they arrived at their answers... School has not been a place where students and teachers come together to talk about important questions. School has been a place where students try to guess what the teacher wants them to say (p. 13).

This view presents serious challenges to criminal justice instructors who seek to create opportunities for dialogue and exchange as part of an active learning approach. If productive exchanges of controversial topics are to occur, instructors must convince students that their particular class is different from their previous experiences. Also,

students must believe that they will not be downgraded or penalized simply because they disagree with the instructor or another classmate.

To overcome opposition and fear among students caused by perceived power differences we suggest that instructors ask students on the first day of class to consider the role of conversation in their lives. Students should be prompted to answer questions about how often they engage in conversations with others and for what reasons? What is the role of conversation in organizations or in various stages of the criminal justice process? Through this initial discussion, students will conclude that conversations are fundamental to human experience and that humans learn a great deal by talking and listening to others. Throughout any criminal justice course dealing with myths, panics and other controversial topics, we suggest that instructors model their behavior so that students understand that challenging others, including the instructor, is acceptable and central to learning. While the ability to have an engaged class may vary with the type of personality of the instructor, there are several ways to foster an atmosphere where open intellectual dialogue is more likely:

1. Instructors may consider not standing at the front of the class or at a podium. This suggests authority and is less likely to foster open discussion. Try to find a seat among the students and develop an atmosphere that suggests to the students that this is not a normal lecture setting and we are going to talk about some issues.
2. Consider tossing an object (e.g., balloon, ball, or stuffed animal) around the class. Whoever has possession of the object has the floor and is expected to contribute to the class. Since the stress of participation is mediated by the distraction and carefree element of the object, students participate more freely. While, this can lead to off the cuff responses, with the appropriate due diligence of the instructor often they can be redirected to the topic "at hand."
3. Reduce students' stress by allowing them to play "Devil for the Day". Explain to students that for a class meeting they are allowed to play devil's advocate to any statement made by the instructor. This encourages student participation and breaks down barriers since they will be more eager to "devil" the professor.

Perceptions of the Other

Before students enter the university, they have experienced various aspects of our culture that encourage them to reduce information into "norm" versus "other" dichotomies (Hedley & Markowitz, 2001). Here, norm does not connote its most common sociological use – rules that guide behavior, but rather what our culture emphasizes as the standard against which alternatives are measured. An example, similar to one offered by Hirsch (1997) is the following characterization of Supreme Court Justices: Anthony Kennedy- Justice; Sonia Sotomayor-Woman, Justice; John Roberts- Justice; Clarence Thomas-African American, Justice. Given that Justices Kennedy and Roberts fit into the 'norm' category of white males, they need no further descriptive title. However, both Justices Sotomayor and Thomas have characteristics that establish them outside the norm of "Justice". They are the "other". The "norm" versus other dichotomy also can be expanded to include claims about knowledge, which are definitely center stage when discussing myths and moral panics. "Norm" knowledge is information defined as relevant, essential and indisputable (Hedley &

Markowitz, 2001). For example, “norm” knowledge presents Western civilization as the definitive lesson in history; “other” knowledge, such as Indigenous is seen as less relevant or important. “Norm” knowledge both defines and supports the status quo. “Other” knowledge is most often used to define deviance as compared to the norm.

The challenge of the norm/other dichotomy for instructors is that for many students the claims of the “other” become morally suspect. If only the “norm” set of knowledge claims is legitimate, then all others must be deviant at least and criminal at worst. Accordingly, students learn to categorize the “other” in a negative light. The norm is right and good, and the deviant should be avoided. Therefore, upholding the norm/other dichotomy can be a moral issue.

When social realities about crime and criminal justice are reduced to norm v. other dichotomies, students’ moral understanding is reduced to us vs. them distinctions. As instructors of criminology, one of our main goals is to help students understand that much about crime and crime policy is shaped by historical, political and social processes. If students are taught to better understand the social contexts that are used to create crime myths and panics, then they will be more likely to recognize the limitations of their dichotomous moral worldview and recognize that very few individuals are completely good or completely evil. As criminal justice instructors we attempt to debunk myths and moral panics about criminal behavior and justice by exposing students to limitations in their own learning.

Techniques for Active Learning about Myths and Moral Panics

There is a broad and established pedagogical literature on teaching and learning sufficient to convince most academics that the classroom experience for students should encompass more than the traditional lecture format (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991; Meyers & Jones, 1993). Traditional lecture courses tend to place students in a passive role. Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) summarize problems with lecture based teaching such as listener attention span, learning styles, and different levels of reasoning. They also conclude that while lectures are appropriate in many situations, they tend to connect with only those students who “ have high working memory capacity, have all the required prior knowledge, have good note-taking skills, and are not susceptible to information-processing overload” (p. 89).

Fortunately, there are many ways to make lecturing more effective for a wider range of learners by incorporating various active learning techniques. Active learning is generally defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process (Prince, 2004). Active learning is a student-centered and inductive learning process. An active learning approach requires students to do meaningful activities and think about what they are doing. A second component is creating an opportunity for students to evaluate, analyze and communicate about the new information (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Fink 2003). Overall, active learning activities tend to increase students’ memory for information taught and improve the depth and quality of students’ thinking and writing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Cherney, 2008).

Active learning techniques may benefit the criminal justice discipline because a majority of practitioners in our field have positions that require them to gather

information, critically analyze the situation, and synthesize what they know about the scene with what is permitted by law on a routine, day to day basis. Also given the “hot topic” issues of most criminal justice courses, this discipline is well suited for more student-centered activities included in the active learning pedagogy. In this section, we demonstrate the effectiveness of an active learning approach by examining four active learning techniques: the case study, truth statements, lecture rebuttals, and structured controversy. These active learning strategies were selected because they are well suited for dealing with the three aspects of student resistance previously discussed. After a brief summary of each technique, a discussion of how each reduces the influence and distraction of classmates (peers), instructor-student power differences (power), and problems caused by dichotomous norm thinking (perceptions) is presented. The discussion of each technique concludes with an example of a contentious crime myth or moral panic.

Case Studies

The case study method has become a widely used technique in classroom instruction (Bean, 2001). The case study can be generally defined as a real-life problem or scenario that has no obvious, single or correct solution (Millis & Cottell, 1998). Case studies have historically been used for brainstorming and discussion about the particular intricacies of a problem as well as to generate reactions and strategies about a specific problem. They encourage active learning by engaging students in stimulating, experiential, and real-world situations. A well-constructed case study should provide the students with enough detail and direction so that they know the parameters of a given situation but remain free of any language or inferences that lead students to infallible right answers.

Peers, Power and Perception: The use of the case study creates a safer environment for students to share their thoughts about controversial issues because the focus is taken off their own beliefs and morals to the specifics of the case study. However, when a case study only presents broad parameters, students will likely reflect back on their own beliefs and worldviews. In this situation, it is up to the instructor to gather all responses from students and illustrate the diversity of perspectives. Case studies work best with information about myths, panics and other controversial issues when students are broken into groups. This division further removes the issues of peer influences and gives resistant students the opportunity to discuss outside of the focus on the whole class. Further, because well-constructed case studies have many potential outcomes instead of a definitive, right answer, the power differential between the instructor and students is noticeably less. This active learning technique also diminishes dichotomous thinking because the details of the case study helps to shift student attention towards the particulars of all elements that could possibly be considered and away from thinking based on moralistic assumptions.

Example: Most juveniles and adults have committed a crime for which they could have been arrested; however, due to the media and the proliferation of dichotomous norm thinking most people reject relating to offenders on any level and view them as people far removed from their world and experiences. The example below provides a case study exercise aimed at debunking the myth that

offenders are always completely unrelated to the rest of society. The case study provided below encourages students to analyze the type of offender and offense based on reactions and portrayals of the media and others in the community. Students inevitably will decide that this person is a serious violent offender and often conclude that the individual is some form of terrorist. However, when they are told that the real world case was actually built around several cases of animal activists who maintained a webpage and blog, and whose most serious adult offense was the release of 20,000 minks, they quickly see how assumptions about offenders lead to biased conclusions. From this point, the instructor can then lead the class in a discussion about the effects of labeling on an offender.

CASE STUDY – House Arrest

What if you learned a potential offender is moving into your community. The potential offender is moving near you and/or people that you cared about deeply. This person has been placed in house arrest. The accused has a criminal record, and a documented and confirmed history of drug and alcohol use and abuse.

The case is a high profile case and has been covered by the local media extensively. Also, while out running errands, you overheard citizens talking about the case. Everyone seemed concerned.

The press has focused on the atypical offender characteristics of this individual. This person is intelligent; knows how to use the internet and other computer technology, and is suspected of coordinating activities of a criminal group. The accused has been repeatedly characterized as “a predator,” “a mastermind,” and “an extremist.”

The other “talk around town” was about the individual’s pretrial sentence to house arrest. The offender was placed on pretrial house arrest because local and other appropriate facilities were full. This person has no steady employment history and really can’t get a job considering the charges and media attention.

So, the residence is the jail. The accused is wearing an electronic device*, but the local media were also airing/printing stories about other offenders in the same jurisdiction who had disabled the equipment. These offenders had been caught doing everything from eating at McDonalds to home invasion.

*The electronic device is not GPS. There is no local, state, or federal money for GPS.

Students are prompted to create a character profile of the offender. Including as much detail as possible. (Education level, class, gender, income, and personality traits as relevant.)

Next, students are prompted to list the types of offenses this person may have been engaged in during the past.

Truth Statements

The use of truth statements is an active learning technique that is useful for the beginning of the semester or the beginning of a new portion of the course because they require students to simply write one thing that they know to be true about a subject (Robinson, 2000). The instructor should select a few examples for the board or

categorize responses of the whole class into several types of statements. Next, the instructor can prompt the class to specify any assumptions that each statement is built upon and follow up with the facts about the issue.

Peers, Power and Perception: One benefit of truth statements in instructing about controversial myths and panics is the demonstration to students that what they think they know can sometimes be completely unfounded. The debunking of myths by a simple exchange of facts and discussion of assumptions is a powerful indicator to students that this material is going to challenge their way of thinking about the world and how they process information. The participation by the class in generating and deconstructing these assumptions opens doors for students who may be reluctant due to peer or power differences, because the statements are in their everyday language and based on assumptions shared by classmates. The creation of a shared experience fosters engagement and helps diminish perceptions that contribute to dichotomous or us vs. them. thinking.

Example: Present the topic of Youth Gangs and Drugs to the class and instruct them to write one thing they know to be true about this topic. Typical reactions can vary from statements such as “Gang members are high all the time” to “Gang members deal drugs a lot”. The instructor can then use these statements to confirm the higher rate of drug use among gang members but debunk the myth that youth gangs control the drug market in the United States.

Lecture Rebuttals

The lecture rebuttal is a technique we have created that combines the active learning techniques of reaction papers and debate rebuttal. The instructor should present a lecture that summarizes the key points of both sides of an issue. The students then work individually to develop a rebuttal to one of the sides of the argument and also include a reflective component that is more exploratory and personal. It is essential that the exercise prompt students to explore the connections between the course material and the students’ individual assumptions that have led them to select that particular side of the argument. After the papers are collected, the instructor should divide students into the two sides of the issue and allow each group to create a collective set of rationales for their choices.

Peers, Power and Perception: Lecture rebuttals reduce peer and power influences because students are actively engaged in groups. Also, this technique helps to reduce dichotomous thinking because the student is exposed to not only both sides of the issue presented in lecture but all of the rationales shared by classmates. This active learning technique is appropriate for myth and panic issues because it exposes students to different aspects of the course material and exposes the shared assumptions of classmates.

Example: The lecture rebuttal exercise works well for topics where students have long held assumptions. This allows the instructor to introduce a more in-depth and well-rounded analysis, which gives the students plenty of material to react to. Topics such as the legalization of all drugs and gun control legalization are examples that fit this active learning technique.

Structured Controversy

Structured controversy is an active learning technique that promotes reciprocal teaching. Using structured controversy, an instructor identifies a number of controversial topics, or, in our case, myths and moral panics. Students are placed into groups of two or four, and then each group is divided with each student or pair assigned to one side of the issue. Each student or pair must research the issue and prepare to defend their position within the small group. Each student or pair present their position followed by a period of argument and rebuttal. Then, the next student or pair repeats this process. Later, students or pairs reverse perspectives and the process above is repeated. Finally, the pair or group combine all the material and determine which position they determine to be most compelling and reasoned. The report may be presented in written or oral form. One primary goal of this technique is that the responsibility for teaching others is on the students and not the instructor.

Peers, Power and Perception: Numerous benefits of structured controversy have been documented including student movement away from knee-jerk dichotomous assumptions towards a better quality of problem-solving (Steiner, Brushy, Gerdes & Hurdle, 2003, see Johnson & Johnson, 1989). It is suggested that this is due to forced exposure to and struggle with more than one point of view (Steiner et al., 2003). This new knowledge and exposure helps to decrease dichotomous norm thinking. Structured controversy can also improve relationships among students because it creates stronger and more supportive social bonds. In this technique, misconceptions about the instructor's power or expertise about the subject are diminished because the center of the exercise is not the instructor but, rather, the sharing and synthesis of material by the students.

Example: The topics selected for this active learning technique work best if the student does not already hold deep-seated emotional conclusions. More obscure, but significant topics, such as the constitutionality of asset forfeiture may work better since students are unlikely to be exposed to this issue through the news media, parents or peers. Part of structured controversy requires the student's own investigation into the topic, and students may perform better when faced with a topic they do not automatically assume they know much about. Other examples of appropriate controversial topics that have less exposure include issues like the pros and cons of the transfer of juveniles to adult court or the level of responsibility of the federal government in reducing street crimes.

Dealing with Disruption

Regardless of the classroom activity including those discussed above, courses about myths and moral panics are frequently emotionally charged because they reframe the way students encounter and understand information about the law, crime, and justice. But classroom scenarios where students want to participate are often not the instances when emotional outbursts and emotionally laden disruption occurs. Rather, situations where instructors are faced with either absolute silence or the voices of zealous advocates for a particular attitudes or behaviors become the most likely settings for extreme, prejudicial, or uncivil comments and discussion. In the former, some students, sensing that no one is going to contribute, and they likely face little or no

repercussion from other students or the professor, take the liberty to interject outrageous or extreme points of view. In the latter situation, the issue is not only the strength of conviction held by the student/s but also the problem of a larger number of students finding themselves excluded from the discussion.

When discussing myths and moral panics, it is clear that there are many issues that students know something about, and some that they are mostly unsure about. Whether the topic is something that they have a definitive perspective on or not, the major task for instructors is often preventing students from getting upset or angry with one another or the instructor. To prevent disruption, we encourage instructors use strategies such as boundary setting and monitoring, humor, and introspection.

Boundary setting and monitoring is another way for setting the rules of the game and creating a safe learning environment. It is common for instructors to set behavioral standards at the beginning of the course, but we argue that it is crucial for instructors who deal with controversial topics to remind students frequently of the boundaries. Some rules may be quite formal, such as do not talk when others are talking or raise your hand to be considered for participation. Other rules may be aimed at cognitive and emotional processes such as: it is okay to challenge another's position, but do not make it personal, or consider all sides and perspectives of the issue (Johnson & Johnson, 1993). The setting of rules and boundary issues are crucial to an active learning environment. Without clearly communicated codes of conduct, learning at any level is diminished. Once the rules are developed, instructors must enforce them if they are violated. Students learn which rules are important to an instructor based on the level of monitoring and correction they receive. Those behavioral rules not enforced do not exist in the student's experience.

Another useful technique is the use of humor. A considerable amount of research has addressed the benefits of humor in the classroom (Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008). The use of humor has been linked to an enhanced quality of the student-teacher relationship and increasing affective learning (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). A quick witted remark can bring a situation that is uncomfortable, at the least, and disturbing at the most, to a more comfortable flow of dialogue and exchange. At least, it can be used by the instructor to take some of the "heat" onto themselves and off a tense classroom situation. For example, it has been our experience that students share detailed and sometime graphic information about crimes or offenders they have encountered or seen in the media. The remainder of the class is often left a gasp or wincing, and it is obvious that the absurdity of the situation needs to be acknowledged to which a useful response is "You know, I'm not a psychiatrist, but I do own a couch. And, that is nuttier than a fruit cake." The humor statement eases the mood and allows for a transition away from the sordid account. However, such humor statements must be used with caution. There is no rule of thumb regarding the use of humor in response to students' crime stories, and most instructors simply rely on their own experience and intuition. In our experience, it is relatively straightforward to tell the difference between students who are sharing an emotionally or physically laden experience compared to those who just want to share another "dumb cop encounter or dumb criminal story".

If the situation becomes very intense, it may be useful to have students do a semi-structured assignment, asking them to use their own introspection to determine if ill

feelings are warranted. After any situation where it is clear by verbal and nonverbal cues that students are harboring negative sentiments about what happened in class, an instructor could ask students questions similar to the following: 1) In what ways did I (or my group) contribute constructively to the classroom experience today, 2) Did I (or we) evaluate information and ideas and not people? 3) Did I (or we) adequately consider all sides of the issue/controversy? 4) What could I (or we) do to improve our performance and experience for the next class meeting? (Overby et al., 1996). Besides making students focus on their overall contribution and consideration of the course material, these questions promote ownership of the experience by the students, thereby facilitating an active learning environment. This type of exercise reinforces an active learning strategy by giving students the ability to reflect and think about what they have done and experienced in the classroom setting.

Our suggestions for dealing with emotionally charged situations is by no means exhaustive, but we are convinced that it is better for instructors to possess a few tools so that some, although not all, heated discussion can be dealt with appropriately. It is probably inevitable, considering the topic of myths and moral panics and the contradictions they present to students' worldviews, that unpredictable and inevitable outbursts occur. We both have personally experienced situations where students disclosed personal experiences with criminal activity or victimization in explosive manners in response to either our or a fellow classmate's comments. In these instances, instructors must weather the storm and regroup the class the best they can while making every effort to engage the students' experiences.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the goal of this paper is to present and examine several active learning techniques established by pedagogical literature as being most effective when teaching controversial issues such as myths and moral panics. We also argue that recognizing and understanding the roadblocks to classroom instruction, such as peers, power, perceptions, as well as emotional disruptions are just as relevant to a positive classroom as the active learning techniques discussed here.

Any classroom activity or experience that teaches students to deal more rationally and effectively with conflicting information and emotions may increase overall learning outcomes of higher education and life lessons in general. We find that presenting students with data and information on crimes and crime policy in a manner that actively engages their long held assumptions and beliefs is not only intellectually challenging for students, but also enabling of us as instructors as it encourages students to think beyond our traditional responses to crime. To facilitate this level of analysis and to give students the tools to move beyond their own experiences will help develop criminal justice professionals who are better able to confront the crime challenges of the future.

References

- Bean, J. C. (2001). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Bonwell, C.C., & Eison, J.A. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom* (Report No. 1). Washington, DC: George Washington University: AHSE-ERIC Higher Education.
- Cherney, I. (2008). The effects of active learning on students' memories for course content. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 9(2), 152-171.
- Cohen, S. (2004). *Folk devils and moral panics* (3rd ed.). London, England: Routledge.
- Fink, L.D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Frymier, A.B., Wanzer, M.B., & Wojtaszczyk, A. M. (2008). Assessing students' perceptions of inappropriate and appropriate humor. *Communication Education*, 57(2), 266-288.
- Goode, E., & Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994). *Moral panics: The social construction of deviance*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. & Robert, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis*. London, England: Routledge.
- Hedley, M., & Markowitz, L. (2001). Avoiding moral dichotomies: teaching controversial topics to resistant students. *Teaching Sociology*, 29(1), 195-208.
- Hirsch, E. Jr. (1997). *What your kindergartner needs to know: Preparing your child for a lifetime of learning*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Innes, R.B. (2007). Dialogic communication in collaborative problem solving groups. *International Journal for the Scholarship for Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 1-18.
- Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (1989). *Cooperation and competition: Theory and research*. Edna, MN: Interaction Book Company.
- Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (1993). Creative and critical thinking through academic controversy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 37, 40-53.
- Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Smith, K.A. (1991). *Cooperative learning: Increasing college faculty instructional productivity* (Report No. 4). Washington, DC: George Washington University, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education
- Kappler, V., & Potter, G. (2005). *The mythology of crime and criminal justice* (4th ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Lusk, A.B., & Weinberg, A.S. (1994). Discussing controversial topics in the classroom: Creating a context for learning. *Teaching Sociology*, 22, 301-308.
- Meyers, C. & Jones, T.D. (1993). *Promoting active learning: Strategies for the college classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Millis, B.J., & Cottely, P.B. (1998). *Cooperative learning for higher education faculty*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Overby, L., Colon, G., Espinoza, D., Kinnunen, D., Shapiro, D., & Learnman, J. (1996). Structured academic controversies in the professional physical education field. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, 67, 30-33.
- Payne, B.K. & Gainey, R.R. (2000). Developing and dealing with controversial issues in criminal justice courses. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 11(2), 313-325.

- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93, 223-231.
- Robinson, M.B. (2000). Using active learning in criminal justice: Twenty-five examples. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 11(1), 65-78.
- Steiner, S., Brzuzy, S., Gerdes, K., & Hurdle, D. (2003). Using structured controversy to teach diversity content and cultural competence. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 23(1/2), 55-71.
- Wanzer, M.B., & Frymier, A.B. (1999). The relationship between student perceptions of instructor humor and students' reports of learning. *Communication Education*, 48, 48-62.