

DEVELOPING AND  
IMPLEMENTING TEACHING  
IN SENSITIVE SUBJECT  
AND TOPIC AREAS

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# DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING TEACHING IN SENSITIVE SUBJECT AND TOPIC AREAS

A Comprehensive Guide for  
Professionals in FE and HE Settings

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*In loving memory of Kay Brown and Jo Cunningham, two inspirational  
Social Workers who sensitively championed Social Justice.*

*Alison*

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# FOREWORD

The very nature of sensitive issues makes them challenging and anxiety provoking for academic staff to deliver. Few of us feel equipped to wrangle with the thorniest topics in public health, but doing so in a classroom can be even more confronting. We want to translate complex issues into accessible material for an increasingly diverse range of students, without losing the essence of the challenging human experiences those issues contain. ‘Key Concepts and Concerns of Teaching Sensitive Subjects and Topics’ supports this journey by providing chapters exploring a wide range of commonly relevant themes.

A wide-ranging body of experienced authors bring their expertise to subjects like culture, colonialism, and faith. They acknowledge the complex experiences of substance use, poverty, homelessness, caring, and trauma with empathy and sensitivity. By exploring varied roles and identities through lived experience accounts, the text gives an active voice to populations that are often silenced. In addition to learning about the needs of the ‘other’ the authors challenge the reader to understand their own positionality, recognising the power inherent in being an educator.

This text has real-world applications for educators from a wide range of disciplines, delivering teaching for students at all levels. As society hardens its attitudes to some of the most disenfranchised people, facing the most challenging lives, it becomes increasingly important that we counter this by creating empathy and understanding in professional communities. ‘Key Concepts and Concerns of Teaching Sensitive Subjects and Topics’ encourages and supports us to create meaningful spaces to explore issues safely, developing the necessary empathy to meet needs and allow all members of society to flourish and thrive.

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# KEY CONCEPTS AND CONCERNS OF TEACHING SENSITIVE SUBJECTS AND TOPICS

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## ABSTRACT

*Any topic can be sensitive, and every subject area will have sensitive issues and topics that academics in higher education and further education settings will be expected to negotiate. Your ability to negotiate sensitive topics is important because the ways in which you engage and teach about sensitive topics will affect your ability to provide a positive learning experience and teaching alliance with students. In practice, you will face enormous pressure to 'deliver' on teaching, which will only be mirrored by similar freedoms in deciding on how and what needs to be done to get students to where they need to be. Negotiating, identifying, preparing for and delivering teaching on sensitive subjects and topics can be difficult in individual academics. This chapter, seeks to prepare you for developing a deeper understanding of some of the philosophical, theoretical, and practical-based concerns and issues related to teaching sensitive topics and subjects. This chapter begins with providing a rationale for what follows, and it explores some of the*

*key themes, positionality, identity, transformational learning and lived experience, that are explored in greater depth in the collection. This chapter also contains a detailed breakdown of the structure and the content of this edited collection, and it concludes with some reflective comments about the implications of the collection for you as an individual and your career.*

**Keywords:** Sensitive topics; transitional learning; positionality; ethical practice; lived experience; teaching alliance

## INTRODUCTION

Many disciplines and subject areas in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) have a curriculum that encompasses or encroaches on sensitive content. The subject matter of sensitive issues within the curriculum can relate to local and/or global concerns, and sensitive topics may include issues like ‘intimate partner violence, disability, politics, racism, torture or death’ (Lowe and Jones, 2010, p. 1). This is due to these subject areas, including content, being concerned with aspects of societies’ inhumanity to each other and/or injustices that are prevalent in society. Theoretically speaking, any subject area can have sensitive content, or at least be made complicated, because it is not unusual for students and educators to hold strong beliefs, values and opinions on subject or topic areas (Pilcher, 2017). Over the last two decades or so, there have been some small pockets of ‘work’ that have provided insight into the teaching of sensitive topics in some specific subject areas, for example, ‘race and ethnicity’ (Nixon and McDermott, 2010); ‘feminism’ (Lee, 1993) and ‘sexuality’ (Braun and Clarke, 2009). The focus of this work has been on identifying the issues and concerns that exist within these specific subject areas. However, little has been learned about the implications of these issues and concerns in relation to what can be done to improve practice and teaching in other topics and subject areas. What is becoming increasingly apparent in relation to teaching practice, is that more needs to be done to explore the common features of concerns associated with teaching sensitive subjects and the strategies used to engage with them across different subject and discipline areas (Lowe and Jones, 2010). This chapter explores some of the key concerns [positionality, transformational learning (TL), working with lived experience] associated with teaching sensitive subjects in HE and FE settings. In doing so, it provides a context for what follows in the rest of this collection and includes a detailed breakdown of the content and structure chapter by chapter. This chapter concludes with some reflective comments

about the teaching of sensitive topics and subjects, together with a consideration of the implications this may have for you, your colleagues, students, and those whom you work with in your teaching practice.

#### POSITIONALITY, TL, WORKING WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

In HE and FE settings, those who teach face significant freedoms and pressures to deliver on ‘the curriculum’ and what it is students are able, or expected, to do or know. They also face similar freedoms and pressures in deciding what needs to be included and what needs to be done to get learners to that point. If you are new to teaching, you need to recognise that there will be a ‘sensitivity spectrum’ and a range of sensitivity concerns that you will need to identify, consider, negotiate, and attend to at some point in your practice. You also need to recognise that in HE and FE settings, there is a high disparity and gap between the ethical challenges, demands, and advice for researchers who research sensitive subjects and topics when compared to those teaching these subjects to students (Lowe and Jones, 2015). In teaching practice, those who engage students about sensitive topics and subjects often do not have the same levels of guidance or institutional requirements about ‘ethically informed teaching’ and this often leaves them ‘unsupervised and under-resourced’ (Lowe and Jones, 2015, p. 1). In situations like this, decisions about how to resolve sensitivity concerns are often left to the individual educator (at best, small teaching teams or module staff), who will also have to decide how sensitive subjects are approached, negotiated, and then taught to students.

An effective way to start to consider sensitive topics in relation to your teaching practice, is to understand and reflect on your own positionality and orientation towards a particular subject or topic area (Holmes, 2020). This is largely because your own positionality will influence how you choose to represent (sense of empathy and justice) a subject, which in turn influences (from a theoretical perspective) how that topic or subject is taught (Lowe and Jones, 2015). How you choose to teach a subject will have a direct impact on students’ learning and future practice (Gill and Worley, 2010). The starting position you adopt on any subject or topic area and the worldview you hold about any subject or topic will also be informed and influenced by factors that include your own experiences of learning. There are many distinct factors that need to be unpacked here, and from the outset, you should try and avoid the assumption that what worked for you, and how you learned, in relation to sensitive topics and subjects will work for other people. Positionality in the context of this chapter is also reflective of your own professional identity, and at this point,

you need to note that your own professional identity will continue to form/re-form and influence your teaching practice as your engagement with students, your experience and career progress. As you move forward in your career, it is vitally important that you continue to consider, and reflect upon, your positionality, self-concept and identity and the ways in which these concepts affect your teaching practice (Daumiller et al., 2021).

The teaching of sensitive subjects and topics should also be taught in a way that supports TL. The key idea behind (TL) here is that exposure to challenging subjects and sensitive topic areas prepares students for dealing with these types of concerns and therefore enables them to thrive in their future practice (Heath et al., 2017). Jack Mezirow's theory of TL is a useful starting point if you wish to understand the more theoretical ways in which TL is fundamental to the student experience and therefore supportive of learning (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) argues that learners can make sense of their own worlds by confronting their current ideas and understanding in light of new information, and this can shift their worldview to assimilate to that new way of thinking and practicing. Educators need to be mindful, however, that the teaching of sensitive topics can have a counter-productive impact in relation to individual wellbeing, student engagement, and learning if they are not considered, delivered, or implemented appropriately. If you are developing and implementing teaching on sensitive topics, you will need to consider the needs of the students in front of you and recognise that exposure to sensitive topics can be stressful and disturbing for them. You will also need to be mindful of the student's own personal background and experiences and find ways of reducing distress whilst recognising there will be a significant likelihood that every cohort of students will contain students who have direct experience of the sensitive issues you teach (Lowe and Jones, 2015).

Academic staff in FE and HE settings often collaborate and work more closely with community/professional partners, groups, and individuals from underserved, oppressed and/or marginalised groups, to deliver sensitive content on their professional and academic courses. Many academic staff also have their own lived experience of sensitive issues and concerns and have themselves been members of underserved, oppressed, and marginalised groups. Teaching that is informed by or involves professional perspectives and/or lived experience is seen as providing opportunities for those with lived experience of practice and services to formally bring fresh and new insights into teaching and learning for students. The students we teach live in an increasingly complex world, and so they deserve the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills by hearing first-hand from professionals/

research communities and individuals who have faced the sensitive issues they will face in practice (Lowe and Jones, 2015). Involving People with Lived Experience (PwLE) adds value to the teaching and learning process, as it creates an environment between the highly structured setting of the lecture theatre, and clinical and professional practice settings, in which students can engage with real people, as they share their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences. This approach to teaching students is seen as innovative, as it provides a framework and safe environment in which to learn and transform (if needed) their own knowledge, biases, perceptions, and attitudes. If you are considering co-designing and co-delivering teaching, you will need to know about the factors that professionals and groups face and consider in preparing for teaching and how they experience teaching, how they want to be represented, portrayed, and/or involved in the codesign and/or co-delivery of teaching.

#### THE CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE OF THIS COLLECTION

This specialist collection of edited chapters draws on, and presents, the work of research-active academics and empirical researchers from a range of subject areas, professionals, groups, and individuals with lived experience. This group has extensive experience in collaborating, co-developing, designing, constructing, and delivering teaching activities. In preparing this collection, the editors have actively sought out contributors from different universities, research institutions and communities, to ensure this specialist edited collection has an authentic and interdisciplinary focus in its conceptualisation, design, and content. Authors and collaborators who have contributed represent the fields of: Education, Public Health, Religious Studies, Teaching, Social Psychology, Community Development, Social Work, Social Care, Applied Sociology, Criminology, Geography, Mental Health, Policing, Drug Use Recovery and Disability. In several chapters, academics and researchers from different discipline areas have come together with PwLE as co-authors to offer contributions that cut across disciplines and subject areas. The main audience for this collection is individual academics, module leads, program leads, students from FE and HE institutions, practitioners, community groups and every individual or group who are considering getting involved in teaching and the codesign and delivery of teaching in FE and HE institutions.

The next chapter of this collection, 'Cultural Sensitivity in the Curriculum', is provided by Alison McInnes and Janet Walker. In this chapter, McInnes

and Walker draw on their knowledge and experiences as registered Social Workers, educators/academics/researchers, as well as their own teaching in relation to sensitive topics at local, national, and international levels. In doing so, they explore and reflect on the importance of ‘social positioning’ in relation to teaching practice and advocate for a more ‘culturally competent and culturally sensitive’ *approach* across the curricula. Following on from this chapter, Andie Reynolds provides ‘Teaching the Impacts of Colonialism to UK Higher Education Students’. In this chapter, Reynolds reflects on the use of sensitive theoretical concepts ‘Critical Race Theory’ and ‘Critical Whiteness Studies’ and considers the impact their use can have on student experiences and learning. Reynolds also discusses strategies that have been useful for supporting students in teaching practice and the take-home message here is that ‘student discomfort in relation to sensitive topics’ is something that should not be avoided; instead, it should be managed with care, careful consideration, and compassion. The next contribution of this collection comes from Aidan Gillespie and is titled: ‘Exploring and Engaging with Faith and Religion in University Settings’. Reflecting on Colin Bloom’s recent report ‘Does Government “do God?”’ (2023) and using religion as an illustrative concept, Gillespie explores and rationalises the need for more culturally competent and sensitive teaching practices and explains how and why universities and institutions need to do more to understand the place, meaning, and implications of religion in a person’s life. Following on from Gillespie’s contribution, we have a highly insightful and critically informed contribution from Rahida Mohammad which is titled ‘Female, Muslim and British: A Personal Reflection on the Experiences of Holding Multiple Identities’. In this chapter, Mohammed reflects on concerns with domination, identity, and oppression in professional and educational settings and her experiences of these as a British Muslim woman, who wears a hijab. Both Gillespie and Mohammed argue in relation to teaching and learning, a greater understanding of the religious and cultural dynamic from a lecturer’s perspective would allow their own ideologies to be challenged. They also argue in their contributions that universities and institutions need to do more to support academics, staff, and students to become more attuned to the existence and implications of their own religious worldview. The final contribution of this opening section ‘Teaching About Homelessness – Embodied Learning, Recognising Prior Learning and Experience, and The Key Role of Empathy’ is provided by Adele Irving, Jamie Harding, and Oliver Moss. Reflecting on their expansive collective experiences of teaching sensitive topics to highly differentiated groups of learners (students/professionals/enforcement agencies/policymakers), they provide insight into the factors which they consider

important in helping learners engage with sensitive topics and then understand and reflect positively on the *learner and their role* in implementing policy and practice in their workplace.

Chapter 7 ‘Educating the Educator – Teaching Around Care Experience’ is provided by Hayley Alderson and Carrie Harrop. In this chapter, Alderson and Harrop reflect upon why they consider teaching about care for experienced young people to be a sensitive topic area. In doing so, they recommend that the heterogeneity of care experienced by young people are considered in relation to students understanding the common adversarial issues these children face and that the lived experience, and the direct ‘voice of the child’ is included in all teaching activities and practices. Following on from this chapter, Deborah Smart, Lucy Jane Henshall and Libby Oldham provide us with their chapter on ‘Teaching About Perceptions of Care and Young Caring’. In this chapter, Smart, Henshall, and Oldham reinforce, as Alderson et al. do, the need for academics to be mindful of the highly differentiated experiences and needs of ‘marginalised communities’ including young carers. They also remind us that the students we teach may indeed have their own lived experience of the sensitive topic we are discussing, and that students’ needs will always need to be incorporated into teaching practices. Recognising the nature of sensitive topics and concerns and the impact they have on the students who share lived experiences of their own is the focal point of the next two chapters of this collection. In Chapter 9, Pamela Louise Graham, Nicole Fisher, Connie Dalton, and Richard Lee provide us with their insight into why “‘Teachers need to understand the position that they have’”: Discussing Poverty in Diverse Classes’. This chapter includes a short and incredibly insightful reflexive piece from one of the chapter’s contributors about the challenges they faced as students in relation to stigma and labelling, and the steps that academics can take to ‘ensure the classroom is a safe space for students to learn’. In Chapter 10, Chris Gibbs, Toby Brandon, Christina Cooper, and Mick Hill provide further insight into a range of sensitivity concerns, and how important it is to consider them in relation to the learning, wellbeing and welfare of students in practice. This chapter is entitled ‘Accredited Research Training with People with Lived Experience of Mental Health Distress’ and has coincided with this group developing a module explicitly for people with experience of mental distress who have an interest in being involved in research. Overall, the chapter provides valuable insights into how to teach about mental health in an inclusive and sensitive way. The tips and suggestions provided in this chapter are designed to help educators create safe and trusting environments for students to learn and address challenges with mental health they may face in academia.

From Chapter 11 onwards, the focus of the collection moves more towards understanding how lived experience is concerned, represented, and included in the development and implementation of sensitive topics and subjects. Chapter 11, “‘don’t just say no’: Managing Learning Around Substance Use in a Demographically Diverse HE Institution’ is provided by Craig Ancrum. In this highly reflective chapter, Ancrum critically and ethically explores the role of his own ‘biological narrative’ and the ways in which he utilises and discusses his own lived experiences of ‘crime, criminal cultures and serious violence’ in his teaching practice. Ancrum has published other work on ‘biological methods’ in relation to immersing students in understanding, but here in this chapter, he reflects on the ways in which his own learning and teaching practice is developed and improved from the disclosures made by students who have their own real and lived experience. Chapter 12, ‘Using Lived Experience to Teach Trauma: Containment and Attunement for Yourself and Your Students’, *is provided by* Kevin Ward. In this chapter, Ward also reflects on his use of ‘Story Telling Narrative Approach’ his own trauma, and ‘Recovery in Relation to Trauma’ when teaching. In doing so, Ward considers the ways in which disclosures (staff and students) of trauma and his sharing of specific stories about recovery are needed to reframe and illustrate the benefits of expressing vulnerability and the restorative nature of reflection to students. In Chapter 13, Lydia Lockhead moves on slightly from exploring direct ‘lived experience’ and reflects more on professional practice, research, and teaching about ‘Serious Violence and Criminal Exploitation’. In this shorter but also highly reflective chapter, ‘Teaching and Representing the Needs of Those Who Experience Exploitation and Serious Violence’, Lydia Lochhead reflects on the ways in which students and other professional groups need to be challenged about their own perceptions of marginalised communities, the language they use, and any victim blaming narrative they may bring to their own learning/practice. In Chapter 14, ‘Moving Beyond Surviving to Support the Ability to Thrive: Sharing the Experiences of Young People Whose Parents Use Substances’, Cassey Muir reflects on her experiences of delivering interactive workshops, and teaching practitioners about children’s experiences and what is important to consider when presenting the lived experiences of children and young people whose parents use substances. Speaking about teaching, directly for young people, Muir concludes this chapter with four summary points that young people who experience parental substance use, want practitioners to learn: realisation and awareness of the impacts on young people, recognition of ways young people cope, responding in ways of understanding, and resisting further stigmatisation and isolation of young people. The last chapter in this collection, ‘Sharing