

Title: Evaluation of a 20th Century Sexology Course at Two Universities

Author: Mikella Procopio, BA,¹ Scott M. Butler, PhD, MPH,² David R. Black, PhD, MPH,³
Rose M. Hartzell, MS, CHES⁴

Department/Institution: ¹Department of Nursing, Georgia College & State University.
²Department of Kinesiology, Georgia College & State University, ³Department of Health &
Kinesiology, Purdue University, ⁴Department of Applied Health Science, Indiana University

Evaluation of a 20th Century Sexology Course at Two Universities

Janice Irvine, in her book *Disorders of Desire* defines sexology as, “an umbrella term denoting the activity of a multidisciplinary group of researchers, clinicians, and educators concerned with sexuality” (Irvine, 2005, p. 1). Sexology as a field has been around as long as the field of psychology which dates back to just before the turn of the 20th century. Despite this, there is a dearth of information in the literature about teaching any sort of sexuality at the college level and there is even less information about teaching sexology.

Teaching sexuality, especially comprehensively, is controversial in American society. Even at the college level, courses that include queer theory and other sexuality-based research findings have recently come under attack by state officials in Georgia and the national media (NSRC, 2009). Given the barriers to teaching sexuality, it is not surprising that a 2008 study reporting data from a 17-year study evaluating college students shows that students only “rarely” received sexuality education from teachers (Sprecher, 2008). It would seem then, that society does not want comprehensive sexuality education taught.

Research suggests, however, that even conservative members of society approve of comprehensive sexuality education at the college level. In one study, 75% of self-identified Catholics interviewed approved of teaching both research findings related to and equality and justice for lesbian and gay individuals (Kirby, 2008). These findings suggest that despite the opinions of the church, people want sexual diversity represented in education.

A study by Askew (2007) suggests that a feminist-informed sexuality course “may contribute to the empowerment and independence of young women” (p. 263). Given these findings, a course incorporating the women’s studies perspective to sexuality education can benefit college students.

Sex, Gender, and Sexology in the 20th Century, a new course developed by one of the authors, presents the influence of sexology in the 20th century and draws from the fields of psychology, sociology, women’s studies, history, political science, public health, and others. This trans-disciplinary approach was designed to incorporate a variety of perspectives in the study of sex representative of the field of sexology. The course was offered at two universities in kinesiology or public health departments and was cross-listed in women’s studies.

Course content included the development of the field of sexology, social construction and essentialism, sexual pluralism, sex positivity and sex negativity, the birth control movement, HIV/AIDS, sex education, GLBTQ rights, and the censorship of sex among others. The purpose of the course was to provide students with an understanding of the history of these ideas and issues that shape current understandings of sex, gender, and sexology.

The purpose of the current study is to quantitatively evaluate this new course at two geographically distinct universities in order to determine its effectiveness and the student response to it. In order to conduct this evaluation a course-specific instrument was developed by several of the authors and administered to the students.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 59 participants who enrolled in the elective sexology course completed an evaluation administered by the investigators. Forty-two (71.2 %) were currently enrolled at a large Midwestern university, while 17 (28.8 %) were students at a small liberal arts university in the South. The *M* age of participants was 22.78 years old (*SD* = 4.87). The majority (72.9%)

were female while 27.1% were male. Participants were predominately Caucasian (84.9%), followed by African American (10.2%), Asian (3.4%), and other ethnically identified (1.7%). The majority (62.7%) were seniors, 23.7% juniors, 5.1% sophomores, 5.1% graduate students, and 3.4% freshmen. Nearly two-thirds (62.7%) had previously taken a human sexuality course. In addition, 16.9% had previously taken a course taught by the same instructor who is also one of the investigators, and 11.9% were women's studies minors.

Procedures

Data collection. The campus Institutional Review Board at both universities sponsoring the courses approved all study procedures. On the final day of teaching at each institution, an investigator invited all present students to complete a questionnaire which evaluated the course. Of the 51 total students enrolled at the Midwestern university, 42 (82.3%) provided consent and completed the evaluation questionnaire. Similarly, of the 21 students enrolled at the Southern university, 17 (81.0%) participated in the study. The course instructor did not administer the questionnaire and was not present during completion of the evaluation.

Instrumentation. The participants completed a 49-item questionnaire assessing instructor performance, importance of class recruitment methods, selection of course materials, and potential impact of the course upon student knowledge and attitude. Nineteen items (38.8 %) consisted of commonly-utilized student evaluation questions administered at both universities and were measured on a 5 -point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). These questions assessed instructor performance and usefulness of course materials.

The remaining 30 (61.2 %) items were designed by the researchers and subject to group investigator approval before inclusion. Ten items assessed the recruitment strategy utilized by the instructor to procure students, each of which was measured on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, 1 = not important). One recruitment strategy item allowed the participants to select how they were informed about the course. This item listed 10 options for the participants to choose from and allowed them to respond in an open-ended fashion through an "other" question. Participants were allowed to select more than one item if they were informed about the course through multiple venues.

Seven items measured increase in participant knowledge in sexuality topics and assessed the facilitation of attitude reassessment (SAR), these items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). Two-items measured whether the course prompted the participants to learn more about sexuality and enroll in additional sexuality classes, each was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). One item inquired if the participants had previously taken a human sexuality course and another if they were currently minoring in women's studies. One item asked if the course should be taught again, this item was dichotomous (yes/no). The remaining 8 items assessed participant demographics.

Cronbach alpha scores were computed for individual questionnaire constructs and for the entire instrument. The inclusion criterion for Cronbach alpha value was $\geq .6$. The results indicate scores from .66 - .93 for individual constructs and .93 for the entire instrument. All items tested for internal consistency were retained. Overall, results indicated moderate to high reliability for individual constructs and high reliability for the entire questionnaire.

Research design and statistical analyses. A pre-experimental one-shot case study design was used to assess instructor performance, course recruitment strategies, and evaluate the

potential influence of the course upon participant knowledge and sexual attitude. Descriptive statistics were used to assess data frequencies and measures of central tendency were computed when appropriate. The Spearman Rho correlation was used to assess the relationship between questionnaire constructs and the Mann-Whitney *U* test with a Bonferroni correction was used to assess construct differences by institution (Midwestern vs. Southern). Alpha values of .01 were set for determining statistical significance for Mann-Whitney *U* tests.

RESULTS

Recruitment Strategies

When responding to the question “How did you hear about this course?”, the most prevalent participant response (31.0%) was by an announcement in a class taught by other instructors on campus. Additional common responses included observed a flier around campus (23.8%), suggested by academic adviser (21.4%), suggested by peer (14.3%), and announcement in a course taught by the investigators (14.3%). Additional responses accounted for 14.4% of participant responses. Participant responses regarding the importance of various recruitment strategies are contained in Table 1.

Instructor Performance

Mean and standard deviation values were computed for each of the 17 items which evaluated instructor performance. All items received *M* scores of ≥ 4.0 . The minimum *M* value was 4.10 (*SD* = .79) and the maximum was 4.83 (*SD* = .38). The grand *M* of all instructor performance items was 4.55 (*SD* = .20).

Usefulness of Course Materials

The *M* value response for the item assessing if the assigned and optional readings for the class were useful was 3.64 (*SD* = .85). Similarly, the *M* value response for the item assessing the usefulness of required course texts as 3.40 (*SD* = 1.01).

Increase in Sexuality Knowledge and Prompted Learning/SAR

Participant responses to items assessing increase in sexuality knowledge, prompted sexuality-related learning, and SAR are contained in Table 2.

Relationship among Constructs

Means of individual items contained in each construct were summed for assessment purposes. Spearman Rho correlation coefficients assessing the relationship between the instructor performance, recruitment strategies, usefulness of course materials, increase in sexuality knowledge, and prompted learning/SAR constructs are contained in Table 3.

Overall Course Assessment

When asked if the class should be taught again at the university sponsoring the course, 58 (98.3%) of the participants responded yes and 1 (1.7%) responded no.

Comparison by Institution

Mean ranks were computed for the instructor performance, recruitment strategies, usefulness of course materials, increase in sexuality knowledge/SAR, and prompted learning constructs. Constructs were compared by institution (Midwestern vs. Southern). There were no

statistically significant differences observed among the groups by institution ($U = 356.50, p = .993$; $U = 274.50, p = .281$; $U = 316.00, p = .720$; $U = 279.00, p = .186$; $U = 288.50, p = .242$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

The overall results are positive indicating that the course was both well-received and effective. Students' knowledge of the course material was reported to be increased and 98% of students believe that the course should be taught again. Of all the constructs evaluated, instructor performance appears to be the most significant. It is positively correlated to every other construct. This suggests that the understanding of course topics, attitude, enthusiasm, respect for all ideas, and encouragement of students to both express and question ideas of the instructor influence not only how much students learn from this type of course, but how likely those same students are to further their knowledge of sexuality through continued coursework.

There are three aberrational findings of note. The only M values below 4.0 were the evaluation of the books and other reading materials, the likelihood of enrolling in other sexuality courses, and the prompting to reassess sexuality attitudes. Both of the first two findings had explanations written in the margins of many surveys. Most of the survey respondents were seniors and, thus, were not planning to enroll in any future courses, not just sexuality courses. This artificial deflation of the M score leaves open the possibility that if these students were not to graduate and re-enroll, they might enroll in other sexuality courses.

Another interesting finding was that students were less likely to conduct extensive or frequent attitude reassessments after their initial coursework. The large percentage of students that reported either having taken a previous sexuality class (62.7%) or minoring in Women's Studies (11.9%) may indicate previous experience with coverage of gender and sexuality issues, which would make a decreased likelihood of attitude reassessment not surprising. While much of the historical content was likely unfamiliar to them, the central themes undoubtedly were not. The last aberrational responses were to the questions evaluating the reading materials. These questions also contained common marginalia indicating that the quality of the readings was not the problem, but the quantity of items might have been an issue. Essentially, several students complained, through the surveys that they had too much reading for this class, but given that the readings were deemed effective, their complaints are less indicative of a flaw in course design and reading selection.

Given that this is an exploratory study of a newly developed course, internal consistency values (Cronbach- α scores ≥ 0.6) were deemed acceptable for construct item inclusion. The overall finding of moderate to high reliability for individual constructs and high reliability for the entire instrument suggests that the questionnaire can be utilized in future research endeavors including evaluations of similar academic courses. In addition, the present study postulates the need for additional empirically-based evaluations of sexological and sexuality-related courses. Additional assessments are needed to investigate the relationship between pedagogic constructs such as instructor performance, increase in student knowledge, and attitude assessment and their potential relationship to course implementation.

Given that there were no statistical differences between the two universities in evaluation responses (all p values > 0.5); a type of course utilizing this framework and approach could be implemented at other colleges and universities, possibly with similar levels of success. Whether or not similar courses are adopted elsewhere, this course can serve as a guide with effective techniques and processes. Indeed, even the methods of recruiting students to take the course were

evaluated and determined to be effective. A wide variety of recruiting methods need to be implemented to achieve adequate course enrollment, especially for the initial offering when students are unfamiliar with the course and, likely, the discipline.

In summary, this study provides an evaluation of an innovative course implemented and evaluated at two universities. Results indicate that the course was well received by the student populations and that while these institutions may have differed demographically, there were no differences in student assessments. This study suggests that future courses which use trans-disciplinary approaches to teaching may be a useful pedagogic strategy for instructors specializing in sexology and other sexuality-related fields.

Table 1

Participant Responses to the Statement “How Important are the Following in Recruiting Students to New Classes on Campus?”

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Make announcements in related classes	3.56	.62
Make announcements in instructor’s class	3.47	.60
Ask advisers in the department for assistance	3.47	.68
Email key informants in other departments to announce the course	3.21	.83
Distribute email announcements through the department’s listserv	2.98	.81
Distribute email announcements through other department’s listserv	2.88	.90
Post announcement on department’s website	2.85	.89
Post announcement in department’s electronic/paper newsletter	2.83	.94
Post announcement on other department’s website	2.78	.96
Contact key community members who work in related fields	2.75	.99

Note. Items measured on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = very import, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, 1 = not important).

Table 2

Mean Values for Items Assessing Increase in Sexuality Knowledge, Prompted Learning about Sexuality, and SAR.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
My knowledge increased regarding historical figures in sexology	4.60	.54
My knowledge increased regarding the discipline of sexology	4.57	.50
My sexuality knowledge increased	4.52	.51
My knowledge increased regarding sexuality and social issues	4.45	.50
My knowledge increased regarding various sexuality perspectives	4.43	.63
This class prompted me to learn more about sexuality	4.26	.77
This class prompted me to enroll in more sexuality courses	3.95	.91
This class allowed me to reassess my attitudes towards sexological issues	3.92	.87

Note. Items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree).

Table 3

Correlation Coefficients for Questionnaire Construct Association Assessments.

Construct	Construct #				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Instructor performance	--	.42 [*]	.35 [*]	.68 [*]	.41 [*]
2. Recruitment strategies	.42 [*]	--	.39 [*]	.08	.38 [*]
3. Usefulness of course materials	.35 [*]	.39 [*]	--	.22	.49 [*]
4. Increase in sexuality knowledge/SAR	.68 [*]	.08	.22	--	.24
5. Prompted learning	.41 [*]	.38 [*]	.49 [*]	.24	--

^{*}*p*<.01.

REFERENCES

- Askew, J. (2007). Breaking the taboo: an exploration of female university students' experiences of attending a feminist-informed sex education course. *Sex Education*, 7(3), 251-264.
- Irvine, J. (2005). *Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kirby, B. J., Michaelson, C. (2008). Educating about homosexuality: what do Catholics think? *Sex Education*, 8(2), 225-235.
- NSRC. (2009). Scientific Sexuality Research or Moral Panic? Retrieved on 11/14/09 from http://nsrc.sfsu.edu/article/scientific_sexuality_research_or_moral_panic
- Sprecher, S., Gardenia, H., Meyers, A. (2008). Perceptions of Sources of Sex Education and Targets of Sex Communication. *Journal of Sex Research*, 45(1), 17-26.