

# AP-LS Teaching Techniques

## Developing a Course on the Issue of Child Abuse with a Global Perspective

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At a small liberal arts college, the issue of identity often arises every decade or so in an attempt to create a distinct academic institution. Given the incredibly diverse student body at Randolph College, with a total of 750 students and students representing approximately 35 countries, it was clear that creating a curriculum that offered a global perspective for our students was an appropriate path to choose. Because I had just recently completed co-editing a text that addressed the social issue of child abuse in 16 different countries, I was thrilled to be able to offer a course with on a global perspective. Using this source (Schwartz-Kenney, McCauley, & Epstein, 2001), in addition to two additional texts (i.e. Bottoms and Goodman, 1996; Bottoms, Kovera, and McAuliff, 2002), I was able to provide students with material that covered the history, definition, and prevalence of abuse in several countries, as well as the many psychology and law issues that are raised in cases of child abuse and neglect. Choosing the readings was just the start to developing a course that would turn out to be very different from most (if not all) of my other courses. Below I have provided details of the topics covered as well as the pedagogical approaches used to teach a class on a topic that can be challenging. In this column, I provide the details of the design of the course, including the topics, how students led discussions, assignment of discussion topics, as well as my invited speakers list.

During the development of the course, it was important to keep in mind that the course was to be offered at the 200 level, which means that students were not required to have research methods or statistics as prerequisites. Of course, this lack of prerequisites significantly impacts the type of reading material assigned and in turn the discussions that take place in the classroom. Given the curricular emphasis on global issues, I wanted to create a classroom discussion that helped students understand how the issue of child abuse compares from one country to the next, particularly the differences that exist between societies that have only recently acknowledged the existence and prevalence of child abuse to those who have long recognized the problem and have established prevention programs. I also wanted to discuss the effectiveness of those programs; and to compare the types of legal accommodations in place for children who are victims of or witnesses to abuse. My goal for the course is to provide students with an understanding that child abuse and neglect is a social problem across cultures and around the globe. By examining child abuse as it exists worldwide, students gain both a basic understand-

ing of the social problem and how the culture in which the social problem exists create both cross-cultural similarities and differences. As a result of our discussions, I would like students to recognize how the cultural context shapes particular behaviors, to develop a greater appreciation for the value of comparative studies, and to see how research findings inform our understanding of the social structures and cultural influences that contribute to or protect children from abuse. Given that the course is taught in the psychology department, throughout the semester students should also see the way in which psychological data and theory can help solve the many practical problems that arise when children enter the legal system. Finally, I hope that my students gain an understanding of how the findings from comparative research are used to create changes in public policy.

To create a discussion based course, on the first day of class students are asked to take a look at the list of countries covered in the texts and in pairs they choose a country in which to be “experts” for all classroom discussions. The lists provided are based on the countries covered in the two texts required for the course and student pairs can choose a different country for the two topics; child abuse and eyewitness testimony. I provide a small amount of time in class on that first day for students to find a partner with whom to work during the semester and to provide for me a list of the countries on which they are interested in focusing for each topic. Based on their interests, I then create a list of experts that is used throughout the semester. For our discussion, students use sources that include the assigned texts for the class as well as related chapters that are assigned. Each class meeting is focused on a particular topic, including: the history of abuse, defining the issues of abuse/children’s rights, sexual abuse/physical abuse/maltreatment, child labor, child pornography/prostitution/trafficking, reporting abuse, prevention programs, treating victims and perpetrators, the structure of the legal system, investigating child abuse, children’s role in the legal system, internet sex crimes, children’s eyewitness accuracy, interviewing young children, and child witness research/issues. In addition to these discussions, I’ve used a number of videos or transcripts that illustrate some of these topics very vividly. Two sources that are particularly useful is a Dateline program titled “Children for Sale” that illustrates an investigation of sex trafficking in Cambodia, and a transcript from a Frontline program titled “The Child Terror.” Both can be accessed on the web.



In addition to the discussions led by the student experts, I also include a number of invited speakers from the community whose field of work is directly related to the issue of child abuse. From these presentations students gain a greater appreciation of how these many issues child abuse are handled in "the real world." The speakers include an investigator and forensic interviewer from child protective services, a manager from child and family services, a sentencing advocate from the public defender's office, an assistant city attorney, a sergeant from the sheriff's task force on internet crimes against children, a judge from the Juvenile Domestic Relations District Court, a director of CASA, and finally a social worker. Students are given reading assignments related to the visiting speaker to provide background information and interesting jumping off points for discussion.

Grades for this course were based on the students' participation in each discussion (10% of their grade) and written summaries are turned in by each expert group. The written summaries provide an organized review of information and complete citations where information was obtained (30% of their grade). Another component of the semester grade includes two papers focused on a comparative cross-cultural perspective that goes beyond simply listing factual information. For these papers, students choose a topic, use the class discussions and discussion summaries, and provide an international comparative research paper on that topic. Students are told that these papers, with each counting towards 25% of their grade, should be 5 to 7 pages in length, not including the reference list. I encourage students to discuss with me their topic and the approach they would like to take for each paper. Their first paper assignment must focus on a child abuse issue raised in class and the second paper must focus on international issues related to children's eyewitness testimony.

Responses from students on course evaluations (which are qualitative at Randolph College) often included statements to indicate that they found the course both interesting and challenging. For many students, it was a challenge in a 200 level course to be the main focus of the conversations that took place in class as opposed to a more lecture-focused course. At the same time, many students also noted that they enjoyed the seminar-style of the course. The one challenge faced for many discussions was related to the participation component of the course and grade. During each class meeting, I needed to be aware not only of the content covered but also to ensure that all student/countries were represented. Students did talk to me about those in class who dominated the conversation, making it more difficult for others to talk; a concern for students in any class that is discussion based and in which participation is a component of the grade. Of course there are a number of teaching strategies that can assist with this matter (e.g., discussion format rules) In assessing the course overall, I went back to my goals for the semester that focused on a better understanding of child abuse as a social problem and an awareness of the cross-cultural similarities and differences.

Indeed, many students stated that the course opened their eyes to both the prevalence of abuse and the different ways in which the social and political climate of a country can significantly change how the problem is both defined and addressed.

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- Additional reading assignments and website resources:
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