

Challenges in teaching forensic interviewing best practices - to American college undergraduates

Abstract

The subject of this case study is the author's recent attempt to teach forensic interviewing best practices techniques to undergraduate college students within an upper division Victimology class. The three main phases of a forensic interview namely, the report building phase, the substantive aspect, and closure were the primary areas presented to the students. Key components of forensic interviewing such as asking open ended questions without leading the respondent, encouraging elaboration but not imagination, and listening and recording in a neutral manner were emphasized. Rather than just teaching the points to the students, exercises were designed to allow students to practice the skills in real time.

Volume 5 Issue 1 - 2017

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Received: June 02, 2017 | **Published:** June 06, 2017

Opinion

I have been teaching the undergraduate upper division course called Victimology to an assortment of criminal justice, forensic science, and women and gender studies majors and minors. I teach the class once each year in the fall semester and have done this since I started at my university 27 years ago. My recent attempt to teach forensic interviewing techniques within this class is the subject of this case study. This past fall three variables came together which encouraged me to try and add a few lessons on forensic interviewing best practices into the Victimology class. One impetus was that I had recently returned from a federal training which included New Best Practices in Forensic Interviews and furthermore, the trainer emphasized how marketable a student would be if they were exposed to this information before graduation. Secondly, when I asked students at the start of the semester what else they would like to learn besides the topics on the syllabus, a common request was - how to talk to victims in the field. The third factor was that I was placed in a newly remodeled classroom which easily allowed students to move their wheeled shares into groups or pairs. I was excited to be able to pass on valuable and up-to-date information to the students and while many of them did not seem real excited to cover interviewing techniques, they were enthused about being seen as more marketable than their peers. To teach the information to the students, rather than just presenting some key facts on PowerPoint slides and then moving on to the next topic, I decided that over the course of several days I would present a few key facts and then have the students model that behavior with a partner. I split the practice exercises into three main phases:

1. Is the rapport building phase where the interviewer tries to develop a connection with the victim and sets the stage for the victim's ability to answer questions honestly and in detail,
2. Is the substantive aspect of the interview where most of the information about the incident would be obtained and recorded,
3. Is the closure which can be very important in terms of victim satisfaction and any remaining forgotten information.

I had assumed that the first phase of rapport building would be rather easy for students as they only had to talk to and listen to their

peers in class with an open mind and keep the conversation going for a few minutes. Once they are in the field trying to communicate with children who may have limited vocabulary skills or adult victims who may be suffering the emotional effects of trauma, then there would be a challenge. Simply initiating a conversation with a peer, and asking open ended questions in a manner that does not lead to a particular answer, while encouraging elaboration but not imagination would be the easy part I assumed. I was wrong. It may be the age group and their reliance on short phrases, almost like texting, as a way to communicate. It may be that students are used to communicating about topics they choose, and they are used to sharing their opinion and voicing support or a lack of support for something that someone says versus just listening in a more neutral open-minded fashion - no matter the speaker's viewpoint.

I had planned on the report phase being taken care of in a single lesson but after seeing how strained the conversations were, how they seldom lasted for more than two minutes, and how the interviewers typically passed judgment on their peers about whether they liked or agreed with one's stance on sports or video games, or whatever the topic was that the interviewer did or did not like. The next class. I went over the main points again and pointed out some strings and weaknesses I had observed in our partner interactions during the previous class. During the practice sessions on the second day, I split them into groups of three so one could be the observer of the other two interacting and provide feedback. I kept them on a strict timeline encouraging them to keep a conversation going for five minutes, then two minutes were allotted to receive feedback from the observer, then they were to switch roles and begin again. The entire exercise took a little over 30 minutes, not counting lecture time and time to discuss my observations of their interactions at the end of the period. So if you would like to replicate this process, it is doable, but it takes almost an entire class. And in my experience you may need to do this more than once.

In the class periods that followed I would always have the students take a few minutes to develop rapport with the new peer in class. With continued practice and feedback the students improved and before long the students were easily able to keep conversations going for a full five minutes. In fact they would have probably discussed more,

but I would interrupt them in order to start class lecture material. They slowly improved at using open ended prompts in their conversations and they became less judgmental. Working on the substantive portion of a forensic interview was easier now that the students had learned how not to ask a leading question, how to encourage some elaboration by the victim, and to listen without judgment. We took time to practice this component, again in groups of three so there was always an observer to provide feedback and catch if the interviewer was meeting the subject with the way they worded their prompts or if they were being judgmental in language, tone, or facial expressions.

While it took class time to allow them to practice these skills, my observations of them and the written comments of the observers in their groups substantiated that they needed practice but that they improved as they received feedback and were allowed time to practice. The final phase of closure was the easiest to cover, which was fortunate because we were near the end of the semester. In the closure phase it is your last chance to find out if there is anything else the victim has to tell. Given it was near the end of the semester students knew this would actually be one of the last times they would be engaging with their peers in this fashion and they were patient in listening to any last comments of their peers. Another part of the closure is to thank the victim for their time. The students seemed sincere in thanking their peers for their time and interactions, perhaps in part since a portion of their participation grade in the course was linked to these in class exercises.

In reviewing this class project as a case study I would point out to those who would like to duplicate this project in their classes, that it will take approximately five hours or more of class time. While

one might assume that college students have good interpersonal conversational skills, in this case at least, it would appear that they do not. In particular, they have difficulty listening to others without interjecting their own opinions and judgments, and they are not very good at initiating conversations with people they do not know. With structured exercises, peer observations, feedback, and numerous practice sessions - they do improve. Furthermore, the collegiality that developed among the students in class created a respectful and enjoyable atmosphere in the class for the rest of the semester.

Students commented that these exercises helped them initiate conversations in the real world in awkward situations such as when they went to career fairs, or wanted to speak with a guest speaker, or a stern professor, and so on. A couple of students mentioned that these exercises helped them succeed in the interview process for employment, which they obtained. Though the exercises do take class time, I think it is a good use of time and I plan on doing this again in the fall semester. However, I will start earlier in the semester and be sure to allocate sufficient time. Forensic interviewing skills require more than our usual methods of communication, but these skills will help not only in the field working with victims but they help us, and now our students, be better communicators and better listeners in other aspects of our lives as well.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

None.