

THE VIOLENCE CONDITION: AN ACTIVE LEARNING STREAM LESSON PLAN FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

Violence, although upsetting, exists within and around us. It is innate, on a neurological and psychological level. On a societal level, it has often shaped entire civilizations through time. Recently, it has been pointed out that teenagers and young adults are alarmingly exposed to violent environments, both in real life situations and through the media. The aim of the present lesson plan is to educate on the causes and forms of violence and to encourage an informed outlook and action. Here, we propose a series of activities, appropriate to secondary and tertiary education: (1) Students are instructed to run literature searches on Scopus, Eric, and Google Scholar; to highlight the connection between violent media content and the increase of aggressive thoughts, emotions and behaviors in children and adolescents. Students then present their findings to the group. (2) Students explore material that demonstrates how young people are desensitized to violence due to their extensive exposure to it and employ roleplaying to promote empathy. (3) Students engage in group creative writing as a means to express frustration, fear and anxiety, and to connect with others. The teaching intervention is evaluated on the basis of self-reflection, plenary discussion and exit ticket reports.

Keywords: *Violence, active learning, secondary education, higher education, STREAM education.*

1. Introduction

Violence is on the rise, also including violent content media exposure (Phillips, 2017). Research highlights that exposure to violence contributes to aggressive behavior and desensitization (American Psychological Association, 2013). This issue is particularly concerning young people, as violence influences not only their actions but also their thoughts and emotions (Benjelloun, 2020). Studies confirm that prolonged exposure to violence can lead to heightened anxiety and emotional distress, impacting social interactions and mental health (Droždek, Rodenburg, & Moyene-Jansen, 2019). Despite its significant impact, there is a gap in educational literature on violence, in terms of dedicated curricula on its causes, effects, and implications (Hughes, 2019). To this end, in the current lesson plan, we draft a series of exercises to foster awareness and provide creative outlets. To achieve this, we use a framework of active learning techniques, such as role-playing, creative writing and storytelling, all the while boosting research thinking, science, technology and visual literacy.

2. Methodology

Subject: Violence, media and adolescents - Topic: Media influence on adolescent aggression, adolescents' desensitization to violence, creative outlet of frustration - Age Group: Teenagers and young adults – Duration: 180 minutes.

2.1. Educational goals

Through this lesson plan we aim to promote; research thinking, science and technology literacy, visual literacy, communication skills, writing skills, critical thinking, teamwork, creative expression, empathy, student participation.

We also aim to inform on; effects of exposure to violence, impact of media content, desensitization to violence, creative outlets of frustration, active learning techniques such as role-playing, storytelling and creative writing.

2.2. Materials

(1) IT classroom, (2) Video projector, (3) Speakers, (4) Printer, (5) A4 paper sheets, (6) Google Drive folder (https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1vDuF1jdhGdu6hdBaPy-7y7T7d_OphQ1x?usp=sharing).

2.3. Procedure

The present lesson plan comprises three phases, plus evaluation. Activities are designed to span three hours. During the first phase, students investigate the connection between adolescent aggression and violent media content, by researching relevant scientific publications and sharing their findings with the group. During the second phase, they assess the effect of adolescents' exposure to violence on empathy and engage in role-playing. During the third phase, they use creative writing as a strategy, and by extension storytelling as a technique, to express themselves. Finally, the effectiveness of the lesson plan is assessed.

2.3.1. 1st Phase (duration: 60 min). 1st micro-activity (duration: 60 min). Investigating the connection between media and aggression.

1. Students are allocated to teams in a random fashion (e.g., via www.random.org).
2. Teams are instructed to conduct research into literature to identify academic studies linking violent media content to aggression amongst adolescents. Searches are conducted on the Scopus (<https://www.scopus.com/>), ERIC (<https://eric.ed.gov/>) and Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>) databases, for the 2020-2025 period. The following constructs are used; C1: "media AND violence AND youth", C2: "media AND violence AND adolescents" & C3: "media AND aggression AND adolescents", and searches are restricted to title only.
3. Students study the relevant literature and record their findings in research spreadsheets. Publication information is organized similarly to the study proposed by Gkouzioni, Kleidara, Shehu, Koulouri, and Andreou (2023), namely in terms of publication year, type of study (i.e., theoretical, empirical), study focus (i.e., teachers, learners or both) and educational level (i.e., secondary, tertiary, or not defined/applicable).
4. Then, teams collaborate to compare their findings and compile them into a single report, integrating results from all teams.
5. Teams take turns presenting findings, competing for the most comprehensive and engaging delivery.

Note to instructor: Results should be combined across databases and analyzed (see Gkouzioni *et al.*, 2023) for the construct that yields the fewest search counts, for a more manageable -time and size wise- analysis.

2.3.2. 2nd Phase (duration: 60 min). 2nd micro-activity (duration: 20 min). Assessing the effect of exposure to violence on adolescent ability to demonstrate empathy.

1. Students are instructed to document in a spreadsheet, their thoughts on violence desensitization and the reasons behind it.
2. Promptly, the instructor projects excerpts of an informational video by University of Missouri, Department of Psychological Sciences (<https://youtu.be/Ub-K4rt14Po?feature=shared>), elaborating on how repeated exposure leads to desensitization towards violence.
3. Students reflect on their initial viewpoints and explain whether those have changed in their spreadsheets.
4. The instructor facilitates discussion, encouraging students to examine shifts in their perceptions before and after watching the short films, and to reflect on how media may shape emotional responses to real-life violence.

2.3.3. 2nd Phase (duration: 60 min). 3rd micro-activity (duration: 40 min). Promoting empathy through role-play.

1. The instructor informs the students that they will engage in a role-playing activity inspired by a science communication exercise, namely "The Rant" (Muldoon, 2022).
2. Students are divided into teams in a random fashion.
3. The students then form pairs in their respective groups. One person is the Ranter who receives a card with a prompt (see Google folder) describing an issue that they may present to the group as a topic that either upsets them or they are passionate about. The other person is the Reframer who may listen through the rant without interrupting and then highlight the positive attributes of the Ranter, as described on the card, and their core values being violated according to the scenario they have presented.

4. The Ranter of each team improvises a short (90 seconds) rant based on the prompt on their card. After they finish their rant, the Reframer provides their input, by acknowledging their stance and inviting reflection.
5. The students trade roles and pairs rotate so that everyone does the exercise.
6. The instructor facilitates discussion, highlighting the benefits of role-playing and the importance of communication and empathy.

2.3.4. 3rd Phase (duration: 40 min). 4th micro-activity (duration: 40 min). Employing creative writing to express frustration.

1. The instructor explains to the students that they will engage in a creative writing exercise (non-graded activity). Students may decide not to submit or submit their text anonymously. Also, if they like, they may request to receive feedback.
2. The instructor presents *Guernica*, a painting by Pablo Picasso, which depicts the horrors of war and violence on society (<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/guernica>). Also, the painting by Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, is shown, demonstrating anxiety and existential dread (<https://www.edvardmunch.org/the-scream.jsp>).
3. The students are then asked to compose a short fictional story based on the following prompt: "Drawing from the emotions and themes presented in *Guernica* and *The Scream*, write a short story that explores the effects of fear, frustration and anxiety on the individuals or society at large."
4. Lastly, the instructor facilitates a discussion on the benefits of storytelling as a creative outlet of anxiety, frustration and aggression.

2.3.5. Evaluation (duration: 20 min). Student spreadsheets are submitted for assessment. Furthermore, evaluation includes students engaging in a plenary discussion, where they reflect on the activities they participated in, as well as their perceptions before and after the lesson. They are also required to complete an exit ticket (see Google folder), through which they can provide anonymous feedback concerning their emotions, note key takeaways, comments and suggestions.

3. Discussion

While research has established the grave impact of violent media on behavior and desensitization, education has yet to fully address these concerns. Here, by means of active learning, we aim to boost student participation, raise awareness, educate on creative outlets of frustration, promote reflection and foster empathy.

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