The Journal of Classics Teaching (2023), **24**, 162–164
doi:10.1017/S2058631023000442

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Research Article

Forum

Teaching Difficult Stories: Trauma-Informed Teaching in the Classics Classroom

Peter Swallow
Notting Hill and Ealing High School, London, UK

Abstract

Every textbook has its strengths, and each its own quirks and idiosyncrasies. Apart from any pedagogical concerns about the old *Cambridge Latin Course* textbook series, for example, was the question of how it represented problematic aspects of the ancient world, such as the role of women and the institution of slavery (see Hunt, 2016). The *de Romanis* Latin course (Radice *et al.*, 2020*a* and 2020*b*), which we use at my school at Key Stage 3, takes a much more detached approach to the teaching of Roman culture, presenting its reading exercises as individual stories grouped around each chapter's centralised theme rather than as a narrative told from the perspective of one group of fictionalised characters. But difficult subjects still arise and need to be handled sensitively by the teacher – particularly given the age group (11–14) the textbook is aimed at. This paper shows one way in which this might be achieved.

Key words: Latin, pedagogy, secondary school, trauma-informed teaching

The challenge of teaching difficult stories

In *de Romanis* Book One, pages 154–155, we get the Rape of the Sabine Women – or, as it is euphemistically called in the textbook, the 'Theft' of the Sabine Women (Radice *et al.*, 2020*a*).[1] It is accompanied by an illustration of women being seized and attacked by men, one with her breasts exposed. They are, however, not represented as passive objects, but are shown to be resisting – with one woman in the centre of the image punching an assailant right in his face. The text likewise represents them with a diversity of responses to the assault: *feminae quaedam perterritae erant et magnopere lacrimabant, sed ceterae feminae erant iratae* et *magnopere clamabant* [Certain women were terrified and were crying greatly, but other women were angry and were shouting greatly]. In the story, Romulus announces that the Romans are able *feminas rapere* [to steal the women]. The word *rapio* is parsed as 'steal'. However, the story does not end the traditional way – instead of having children with their abusers and thereby finding themselves compelled to defend them against their fathers, in *de Romanis* Book One the women are merely persuaded no longer to hate their new husbands, with no children – or the act whereby children are created – being mentioned.

The story of the Rape of Lucretia in *de Romanis* Book 2 is much less euphemistic – not least because the story is called the Rape of Lucretia. The English description at the head of the story notes that 'The final crime of the [Roman] royal family was when Lucretia was raped by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the last king of Rome. Lucretia then committed suicide' (Radice *et al.*, 2020*b*, p. 24). In the Latin, we hear from Lucretia directly as she talks to Collatinus: *uxor tua sum, homo crudelis me vicit: corpus violatum est sed anima mea est innocenta* [I am your wife, a cruel man conquered me; my body is violated (*violatum* – parsed as 'violated, abused') but my soul is innocent]. The accompanying picture shows a dark, shadowy figure standing over a terrified-looking woman, him holding a sword and grimacing. The woman is on a bed, and stands out bright-white against the surrounding shadows.

Faced with these passages, the classroom teacher has three basic choices: decide that they are too difficult and not teach them at all; teach them as one would any other story, without adapting one's teaching practice to the specificities of the resource in question; or else, adapt one's teaching practice to the demands of the material and attempt to deliver the story in as sensitive a way as possible.

I suspect that for many teachers, the first inclination would be to simply not teach the passages. That was certainly my initial instinct, and something which we discussed as a department. I teach at an all-girls' school, which perhaps made the thought of teaching these texts more approachable in a certain way – we did not have to worry about the reaction of boys to the presentation of gender-based violence. But given that our students are all hyper-aware of their vulnerability as girls, particularly so recently after the tragic events surrounding the murder of Sarah Everard, killed while walking home one evening, we certainly did not want to stoke their anxieties or teach anything too emotionally difficult for students at Key Stage 3 to be able to access.

But the problem with simply not doing something in the textbook is that students notice when you ask them to skip the page.

Author of correspondence: Peter Swallow, E-mail: p.swallow@nhehs.gdst.net
Cite this article: Swallow P (2023). Teaching Difficult Stories: Trauma-Informed Teaching in the Classics Classroom. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 24, 162–164. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631023000442

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631023000442 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And we were very keen to avoid the idea that anything traumatic or difficult, anything which demonstrated that the ancient world was not all nice, was off-limits to discussion in our classrooms. Sexual assault happens, and one part of the reason why it is so traumatising is that it is so hard to speak about.

Teaching about the ancient world is, of course, about inspiring our students with the wonderful richness of its diversity and creativity, but that should never mean we obfuscate the realities of what life was actually like, particularly for marginalised groups, or fail to draw connections with the world as it is today. As Nancy Rabinowitz has observed, 'particularly in the Classics classroom, but also in the academy more generally, we have not been historically used to addressing [difficult] topics with an eye to the personal experience of the student' (Rabinowitz, 2014, p. 10). So much of classical literature deals with themes of sex and violence, and it is important that students understand this – always in an age-appropriate way, of course. As Hunt has observed, students are then able 'to draw comparisons between humans long ago and in modern terms, and to become more reflective about themselves and contemporary society' (Hunt, 2016, p. 31).

So, with the decision taken to teach the stories, the question then became how to do so in a sensitive way. We decided to approach our lesson design through the model of trauma-informed teaching. This was largely influenced by a paper given by Caroline Bristow at the 2022 Classical Association conference in Swansea on 'challenging rape myths in the (Classics) classroom'. Our hope was that by adopting a trauma-informed approach, we would be meeting both the academic and pastoral needs of our students.

Trauma-Informed Teaching

Teachers know that there can be many barriers to learning in the classroom. Sometimes, something as small as whether the lesson is scheduled before or after lunch can have big implications for students' attention spans and ability to engage. Trauma 'can lead to challenges with emotional regulation, social relationships, and the development of physical symptoms due to anxiety' (Cavanaugh, 2016, p. 41) while also negatively affecting both sense perception and memory (Bedera, 2021, p. 268) – in other words, it can prevent a student from taking part in a lesson.

The key point is that teachers do not always know everything about the home lives of the students in their class, or about what they are emotionally resilient enough to handle. For this reason, 'a crucial aspect of trauma-informed work is providing a caring, safe environment that supports all students, regardless of our knowledge about each student's history' (Venet, 2019, p. 1). If we assume that none of our students have been affected by sexual violence in any way, we risk re-traumatising by accident. And of course, students do not have to have directly experienced sexual violence to find it traumatising – particularly female students who are all too aware that sexual violence is overwhelmingly targeted at women and girls.

Importantly, when we see that a child is distressed by something in the classroom, the educator's focus should always be not on why, *per se*, but on the emotional ramifications of that distress, as Kristin Souers explains:

> When schools first started integrating trauma awareness…, they tended to emphasise the events themselves and the details of those experiences. Educators and other professionals felt compelled to learn a student's 'story' as a means of understanding his or her behaviour. That approach often led to getting caught up in the trauma narrative rather than supporting and understanding the effect of that event on the young person. (Souers, 2016, p. 15).

So when teaching potentially emotionally difficult topics in the classroom, it is important to adopt a methodology which supports students living trauma, and empowers all students to recognise, address and respond to traumatic events in a healthy and constructive way. Bristow sets out four key aims of the trauma-informed classroom as follows:

1. Access: Enable all students to access and engage with material involving sexual violence safely and constructively
2. Recognise: Enable young people to recognise abuse and unhealthy or dangerous relationships
3. Express: Provide students with vocabulary and structures for expressing experiences
4. Overcome: Overcome feelings of shame, guilt or embarrassment and also reinforce the notion of 'life after abuse' (Bristow, 2020).

It would be difficult to achieve in one lesson activity all that Bristow aspires to with these aims, but they were helpful as a yardstick with which to measure myself as I went about deciding how to teach these passages.

Methodology

Before planning the lessons in which I would be delivering these two texts, I made sure to discuss my intended approach both with the department, and also with the pastoral team at school – the deputy head pastoral and the relevant heads of year. In the classes, I first provided content warnings for my students about some of the difficult themes that were going to come up in that day's lesson. I let them know that the classroom was a safe environment, but that if anyone felt distressed, they could excuse themselves temporarily. Content warnings have in recent years come in for a lot of criticism for being 'woke', and for allowing students to avoid having to learn about difficult subjects. Although they have been under-researched, it appears that the opposite is true – they allow students who may struggle to access emotionally difficult material the opportunity to prepare themselves to engage (Laguardia *et al.*, 2017).

I then told them the stories in English before we looked at the Latin in the textbook. My intention here was to avoid surprise – and for a student who is reading a story in Latin, usually word-by-word, surprise is inherently part of the process of deconstructing the meaning. Surprise is a wonderful tool to be used in the classroom, particularly when telling stories. But when the stories in question are traumatic, the emotional effect of surprising students with sudden violence or abuse can hardly be positive. As much as the Sabine Women story attempts to explain around the verb *rapere*, its sudden appearance in that story – and in the direct speech of a supposed hero, Romulus – should be prepared for. I also wanted the students to hear the story from a voice which, I hope, they knew they could trust – rather than from the inherently detached textbook.[2] Perhaps a little counter-intuitively, I resisted the urge to sanitise in my retellings beyond what was necessary to ensure the lessons were age-appropriate. Sanitised retellings of ancient myths do nothing but distort the power dynamics at play in the original story. I went against the textbook's sanitised ending to the Sabine women myth, and told them Livy's version.

In both cases, I made clear, again using my position of authority in the classroom, that we were talking about sexual assault here, and that the responses of the women – in one case, for the Sabine

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631023000442 Published online by Cambridge University Press

women to acquiesce to their abusers and in the other, for Lucretia to take her own life – were their responses to abuse. In the case of the Sabine women, when some students questioned the motivation of the women accepting and even defending their now-husbands, I encouraged them to understand that survivors of sexual violence respond to abuse in many different ways. We discussed what societal power structures may have compelled the Sabine women to act as they did. Again, with the Lucretia story, we talked about why she felt shame and why that shame led her to take her own life – not valorising her decision as the Romans did but simply acknowledging her emotional response to trauma. My attempt here was first, to model how we can understand victims' perspectives without blaming them; and second, to highlight how important it is to avoid seeing survivors of sexual violence as shameful. Thirdly, I wanted my students to be alert to how power structures can function to create unhealthy and even abusive relationships.

Only at that point did my students open their textbooks. In both instances, they first noticed the pictures of course – which are visually very striking. And then they tackled the Latin, with difficult sentences coming up in both passages. We then went over the translation together as a class. My school is very keen on call-upon questioning in class, and I have seen the positive effect it has had on engagement and attainment in my lessons. However, for these stories, I deliberately asked students to put their hands up if they would like to translate the next sentence. This allowed students autonomy as to whether they felt able to contribute, rather than putting anyone on the spot. I also translated the most emotionally difficult sentences myself.

I was careful to avoid asking any questions which could be perceived as justifying the actions of the perpetrator – for example, why did Romulus need to seize the Sabine women? What would have happened to Rome if this had not occurred? Likewise, I did not ask my students directly to consider how Lucretia or the Sabine women felt, thereby expecting them to take on the emotional burden of the abused. Instead, I kept my questions very matter-of-fact – indeed, mostly just asking them to tell me what the next Latin sentence said – allowing students to keep an emotional distance from the narrative. Asking students to respond emotively to the stories we use in class is obviously a valuable skill and an important way of getting them to engage with the subject – but I did not feel it was appropriate for *these* stories. Similarly, I chose not to do any further follow-up tasks on these particular stories, such as a homework activity relating to the myth. I did consider using self-differentiating or 'choose your own adventure' tasks offering varying degrees of difficulty and engagement. This would have allowed students to engage with the stories and their grammar only to the extent to which they felt emotionally and intellectually capable. Ultimately, however, I decided not to dwell overly long on the passages but to turn to other activities for the rest of the lessons.

Observations

For obvious ethical reasons, I did not conduct my trauma-informed teaching practice as a double-blind experiment, or ask my students to fill out a questionnaire about how traumatised they were after the lesson. But I can offer some observations. Firstly, I was incredibly impressed with the emotional maturity with which my students engaged with the lessons. They were unusually solemn as they translated the stories – normally, as with any Key Stage 3 class, there is a lot of chat! – but they got on with the work, and engaged brilliantly with it. When we came together as a group to go over the translation, there was no discernible dip in engagement. As the lessons carried on and we turned ourselves to other tasks, students' usual vivaciousness returned. In one class, a student with complex pastoral needs asked to be excused from the lesson after a few minutes; I took this as an emotionally mature decision and was pleased to let her be excused. In short, the lessons were delivered and a difficult subject broached with sensitivity, and the students responded appropriately.

I cannot speak to the longer-term effects of delivering these lessons. But certainly, my hope is that the students took away, not only more knowledge of Latin syntax, vocabulary and grammar, but also an understanding of how to engage emotionally with difficult subjects, and an understanding of how power structures can be interrogated. It is unfortunate that both stories do not end on a more feminist note – Lucretia in particular is not a survivor of sexual violence, as she responds to the trauma of being abused by taking her own life. I am not sure my lessons provided the students with a model of overcoming – what Bristow (2020) calls the notion of life after abuse. But that is the nature of teaching classical stories, none of which were written with 21st century sensibilities – or, indeed, the merits of trauma-informed teaching – in mind.

Notes

1 As the textbook explains, 'the story is sometimes referred to as the Rape of the Sabine Women. In this context "rape" means theft or abduction because it is derived from the Latin word rapio – I steal' (*de Romanis* Book One, page 155). I find the choice of 'theft' rather unfortunate, as it implies the women are property.

2 Students 'look to us, the trusted adult, for support and perspective. We should encourage the development of this relationship, while recognising that our role as teachers is not to guide a student's mental health treatment' (Venet, 2019, p. 1).

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