

A Classroom Discussion on the Week's Events

 web.archive.org/web/20120120202729/http://pennstatemag.com/2011/11/11/a-classroom-discussion-on-the-weeks-events

November 11, 2011 at 2:20 pm Lori Shontz 23 comments

Class started with a moment of silence. Someone dimmed the lights, and the standing-room only crowd—700-plus strong—in 100 Thomas Building for Sam Richards' SOC 119 class paid tribute to victims of sexual abuse. And not only the alleged victims of former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky.

“We want to honor what they’ve been through and how they are a part of this and how they have been forgotten,” said sociologist **Laurie Mulvey '94g**, Richards’ wife, who teaches the class with him. “And we also want to recognize the people in this room who are victims. There are plenty of you in here.”

So began another afternoon in the classroom of one of Penn State’s more outspoken faculty members. The title of the course is Race and Ethnic Relations, but that’s just a jumping off point sometimes. Richards had tweeted the day before that he couldn’t see sticking to the syllabus during such a momentous week on campus.

“We really thought a lot about whether we were going to do this class,” Richards said Thursday afternoon, introducing the discussion. “We decided the value of speaking today was greater than the value of staying silent.”

Added Mulvey, “We want to let you know from the outset that we are definitely not here to give answers. At best, we’re here to give you guidance about how to walk through this difficult moment and think through this difficult moment. “

Richards started by asking the students to complete this sentence: “I feel ...”

Here’s a list of the answers:

Distraught.

Betrayed.

Embarrassed.

Confused.

Anxious.

Overwhelmed.

Disgusted.

Worried.

Lost.

Angry.

Frustrated.

Numb.

Heartbroken.

Pretty good list, I'd say, for anyone who's connected to Penn State.

And over the next hour, in a presentation titled "Group Think, Personal Responsibility and the Breakdown of a Moral Order: The Crisis at Penn State," Richards and Mulvey delved into the complexities of the events—How do decent people make such bad decisions? How could so many students take to the streets to support Joe Paterno? What keeps people silent in the face of abuse or violence?

They stressed that they were not doing so to absolve anyone from blame, but to show that there's a big grey area in how and why humans behave the way they do.

Take this provocative question: If your sister or brother or best friend were accused of a horrific crime, and were guilty of it, where would you sit in the courtroom during the trial? Given the choices of (a) on the accused's side, (b) on the victim's side, or (c) not attend, nearly 80 percent of the students (voting anonymously with clickers) chose the first option. Why? One student said it haltingly, but eloquently: "They are family ... whatever comes out ... your family is always your family, and you have to be there."

But not everyone would make that choice. And it depends on the situation. And the factors that go into the decision are complex, very complex. In some situations, you offer support. In other situations, you don't.

"You have to live in the middle of this contradiction," Richards said. "You have to live in this zone where both [situations] can be true, and it's very, very, very difficult. But part of becoming a thinker is to sit with two contradictory thoughts in your head and see them both as being true. And not go crazy. And not immediately try to resolve them. And so we're offering that to you. Sit with that. Because this is big. That's *big*."

Yes, it is, which is why I can't recount the entire class in this blog. I'm still sitting with it. But I'll highlight one fascinating part of the lecture. Richards asked the class to respond to this statement: *I think Joe Paterno has been treated poorly*. About 80 percent of students chose

“strongly agree” or agree.”

Then Richards and Mulvey dissected it. A few excerpts from their lecture:

“Human beings, college students, Penn Staters in particular, invest an extraordinary amount of personal energy into everything that is this school around them,” Richards said. “You all come here. This isn’t just Penn State. ‘This is my identity.’”

Mulvey noted that most of the people in the classroom were between the ages of 18 and 21, a time that psychologists have shown is devoted toward developing an identity.

“So you develop an identity around this thing called Penn State—it’s a huge, huge thing,” she said. “Some of what we’re dealing with, that loss and grief that some of you feel, is that sense that something deep has been taken away from you. Something has been taken away from your identity. Fundamentally, that’s how you understand who you are. And that happens when you come here. Partly because of this thing called Penn State, this spirit that’s bigger than all of us. But also because it’s the time in our lives when that’s going on.”

Richards said he wanted to speak to the “20 percent,” those who didn’t think Paterno has been mistreated. “Those of you maybe have been victims of abuse of one sort or another, you’re wondering, ‘How could my fellow students possibly think this?’ Because it’s identity. This is identity. When he’s pushed off the bus, part of you is getting pushed off the bus. It’s like Penn State will never, ever be what Penn State used to be. That’s frightening.”

And to the 80 percent? The ones who *do* think Paterno was treated badly? Richards estimated, based on consuming various media this week, that “98 percent of the people think that you 80 percent are out of your minds. And you’re not out of your minds. You’re not. That’s the complexity. We’re offering you a way to see that. Is that cool? You got that?”

“You know what these people around the United States are asking you?” he continued. “They’re saying, ‘What kind of a person are you?’ Whoa. And now you’ve got to ask yourself, ‘What kind of person am I?’ That’s a big question. So don’t run from that. Stay with the questions.”

This kind of nuanced conversation lasted for about an hour. The class was filmed by WPSU, and I’m hoping the footage will be made available for viewing. You can get another sense of the conversation by checking out the “backchannel” conversation on Twitter, with the [#soc119](#) hashtag.

Class ended most unexpectedly. “We’ve never done this before,” Richards said. “I think we need a ‘We are.’” His words were greeted by applause, and laughter when he added, “This is a race class, so the black and brown people, you’re gonna start.”

May I say that I don't always love that cheer? It feels forced, sometimes, and like a lot of journalists, I've got a pretty well developed cynical side. So I was surprised that as the class cheered, I found myself tearing up.

Lori Shontz, senior editor

Entry filed under: Campus events, Campus issues, College of the Liberal Arts, Joe Paterno, Sandusky scandal, Undergraduate education, Undergraduate students. Tags: Department of Sociology, Joe Paterno, Laurie Mulvey, Sam Richards.

Rod Erickson No Longer 'Interim' Lighting Up The Old Main Lawn

23 Comments Add your own

- 1. Anonymous | November 11, 2011 at 2:44 pm

Hi Lori,

Thanks for sharing. I'm far off in California now, but I am still so connected to Penn State. Reading excerpts from this class is helping me deal with that long list of emotions I have connected to this identity called "Penn State."

Please let the Richards' know that their caring and insight has helped 700...and one.

Gisèle, '85

- 2. Theresa Langdon | November 11, 2011 at 3:30 pm

Maybe the one thing that was left out is our identity as human beings. It's larger than Penn State

Theresa Langdon

- 3. Julie | November 11, 2011 at 5:02 pm

When I was thinking about this scandal, one of my (many hours) of thoughts was "how are they going to discuss this in class?" and "I wonder what it would be like in Sam Richard's class."

I think Sam & Laurie summarized this well... It's definitely something non-Penn Staters have difficulty understanding.

Thanks for providing that answer!

Julie

Class of 2006

- **4.** jls | November 11, 2011 at 5:41 pm

I'm a non Penn Stater and I completely understand the conflict you all feel. I too think Joe Paterno was treated unfairly. We don't have all of the facts yet. The media was on a witch hunt and who more famous to go after than an 84 year old football coach that has been the face of Penn State for more than half of his life. I also understand the atrocities that occurred to those boys. You can feel sympathy for the victims while feeling sympathy for a good man who made a mistake. He is not the perpetrator and the media led everyone to believe Joe was the villain. It's amazing how a group of powerful people, like the board of trustees, can be bullied by the media. Meanwhile, your tuition will go to the defense of the two men who were obligated to do more. That is the disgrace in this.

- **5.** Donnabeth Murphy | November 11, 2011 at 5:57 pm

Gray areas and sitting with something don't fit in with the rapid news cycle. I appreciate this insight. Students were still grappling with awful news when they acted out. They were identified immediately as Paterno sympathizers – not a bad thing before last week.

The pundits are still feasting and subtleties are casualties.

Donnabeth
PSU class of 2015 Mom

- **6.** David | November 11, 2011 at 10:27 pm

I am a long distance alumni 1998 and live in California now. I feel all those and more. Thank you for this article and your insight into this situation.

- [...] present and who did an amazing job of capturing the nuance of some of what we were saying. "A Classroom Discussion on the Week's Events" by Lori Shontz, Senior Editor, Penn Stater [...]

- **8.** Anonymous | November 12, 2011 at 4:35 am

I have one more perspective. I'm an educator and KNOW how things get covered up when the higher-ups don't want to a. believe bad news or b. act on it. I'm not a PSU alum and I really feel for the grad student that witnessed and reported the crime. All the cover-up is absurd! Thanks for the insight. Quite helpful.

- **9.** Lori Shontz | November 12, 2011 at 12:26 pm

I just wanted to thank you all for reading and for your thoughtful comments. I am sure that Sam and Laurie appreciate that their lessons are reaching beyond their physical classroom.

Lori

- **10.** Penn State fan | November 12, 2011 at 1:00 pm

I am concerned about the OWS gang starting a riot at the game. How can you keep them out? They would LOVE to get the media attention and exploit this very unfortunate situation! Please be vigilant as these protestors can get very violent. Thanks and I hope today's game can reveal the BEST part of Penn State!

- Thanks for your thoughtful comments and thank you to Lori for this excellent summary of a complex class about an extremely troubling situation that is not at all easy to discuss with nuance and subtlety, especially in front of 700+ people. Our students are pretty savvy and smart, and in spite of the "rioting" by a relative few (that seemed to be more an expression of grief than it was a statement of support for an icon), they are hungry for guidance for how to move forward and grow through this. I've been impressed...
- **12.** jls | November 12, 2011 at 2:54 pm

Is there any video of your class. I know I would love to see it as I'm sure others would as well.

- **13.** Katrina Rothwell | November 12, 2011 at 4:20 pm

I am a Penn State Alumni and I can just remember what Soc119 was like when I took this class Sam n Laurie YOU ROCK!!! Not just because you are unafraid to discuss the issues but because you bring people into a place that allow them to deal with themselves and the very internal turmoil that we may feel around something like this. Trying to wrap your mind around how something like this could happen in Happy Valley is difficult to do when your in a place of self discovery and You hold Penn State to such a high standard. I am praying for all of the students, faculty and victims of this horrible crime. Sam and Laurie thank you for helping us to think critically

- **14.** Sharon Basile Freeark '83 | November 12, 2011 at 4:39 pm

Thank you for posting this moving story– the very words and understanding I have been searching for all week. I graduated in 1983, and have lived in CA ever since. It doesn't matter how long you've been gone, or how far away you live. You still ARE Penn State. In addition to feeling like our identities are wrapped up in all of this—for those of us around when Jerry Sandusky coached—another horror is that he is the last person you would ever believe to be a child molester.... Watch this video of Jon Ritchie, who explains it perfectly. http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/7219828/no-one-seems-really-know-former-penn-state-assistant-coach-jerry-sandusky

To have someone like him be revealed as a child molester makes you question everything you think is real & true. Thanks again for making some sense of the way we are all feeling.

- **15.** Joyce Hrinya | November 13, 2011 at 1:32 am

I am a 1984 Alumnae of Penn State . This class analysis and understanding really helped me. It is fantastic that the University goes FAR FAR FAR beyond the football team.

For the Glory,

Joyce '84

- **16.** Rachel | November 13, 2011 at 7:40 pm

Thanks for sharing, this is good stuff. Though I am not a graduate of Penn State, many family members have attended, and I am a huge fan of the university. Praying for the young boys, for healing and peace in their lives. WE ARE.... PENN STATE!

- **17.** Anonymous | November 16, 2011 at 7:48 am

Lori,

Thanks for this story. I am a college professor in GA and have also been trying to get at the complexity of the situation with my students. This sums it up well.

Jessica

- **18.** President Erickson Drops In on SOC 119 « The Penn Stater Magazine | November 16, 2011 at 8:19 pm

[...] A Classroom Discussion on the Week's Events Categories Alumni Association Campus events Campus issues College of Arts and Architecture College of Communications College of Earth and Mineral Sciences College of the Liberal Arts Eberly College of Science Faculty research Famous Penn Staters Hintz Family Alumni Center Joe Paterno Nittany Lion basketball Other Penn State sports Penn State alumni Penn State football Penn State in the news Penn State students The Penn Stater magazine University Park campus Tags Alabama Altoona Mirror Andy Colwell Associated Press Barack Obama Beaver Stadium Ben Feller Bryce Jordan Center Cael Sanderson Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts Centre Daily Times Chip Kidd Coquese Washington Daily Collegian Ed DeChellis ESPN Harrisburg Patriot News Jay Paterno Joe Paterno Judy Maltz Legendary Turkey Men's soccer Michael Weinreb Newsweek New York Times Nittany Lion Shrine No. 4 Street of Our Lady NPR Old Main Paris Paternoville Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Rec Hall Russ Rose StateCollege.com Steve McCurry Talor Battle THON Tim Curley Ty Burrell USA Today Vicki Glembocki Washington Post Women's Soccer women's volleyball Sites We Like Penn State Alumni Association OnwardState—a student-run blog Citizen Mom—Amy Zurzola Quinn '94 Penn State Press Steve McCurry's Blog—Steve McCurry '74 Good is Dead—Chip Kidd '86 Today in the Sky—Ben Mutzabaugh '97 Seldom Scene—local photographer Nick Sloff '92 Homegrown Happy Valley—Michele Marchetti '95 Blunt Force Mama—Vicki Glembocki '93, '02g Bloggers Tina Hay Posts | Bio Ryan Jones Posts | Bio Jessie Knuth Posts | Bio Barbara Marshall Posts | Bio Mary Murphy Posts | Bio Julie Nelson Posts | Bio Carole Otyпка Posts | Bio Lori Shontz Posts | Bio [...]

- **19.** LouAnn Kane | November 18, 2011 at 1:21 pm

Thanks so much for giving us this insightful classroom experience, if even remotely. So much of what you summarized is helping me put my arms around what I feel and why. As a 1980 grad and 26 year season ticket holder, I know my “identity” has been branded on me for as long as I can remember. I don’t want to lose the positive experiences, friendships, opportunities and memories that that identity has given me. I want to be open to getting to the truth and accepting whatever it is without losing all else in the process.

- **20.** Beth | November 21, 2011 at 11:25 am

Lori...keep writing about this class. I wish I could attend.

- **21.** Charmaine Daniels | January 3, 2012 at 8:25 pm

I attended in 1970/71 when we shut down the university and talked about the Vietnam War in Social and Political Philosophy class that was held impromptu. Your article reminded me of that wonderful time when communicating about all the painful issues really made them and the act of education itself come alive. Thanks, Lori, it was a good article and the ending was very powerful. I'm not at all a loyal alum (moved out of state long ago and never come back), but I was moved. I think We Are Penn State is much bigger than that chant, but it resonates with the part that is much bigger.

Charmaine Daniels '71

- **22.** [Behind the Scenes and Below the Surface « The Penn Stater Magazine](#) | January 5, 2012 at 4:10 pm

[...] way to cope would be to report. For me, that's been the silver lining in this dark, dark cloud. I attended classes. Took my own class to cover the students' rally at Joe Paterno's house. Showed up at [...]

- [...] 1. "A Classroom Discussion on the Week's Events" [...]

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