

ATTITUDES AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT
DURING A COLLEGE COURSE ON HUMAN SEXUALITY
by
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(Abstract)

The goal of this research project was to understand better how classroom teaching, as purposeful social construction, can influence student attitudes in the direction of increased sensitivity to the diversity and complexity of issues involving human sexuality and individual choices. To develop this understanding, pre- and post-semester attitudes about the topics of gender, sexual orientation, sex education, and sexual coercion were gathered along with demographic information. Written end-of-class comments regarding the four topics were coded for evidence of level of moral development and factors contributing to cognitive effort and commitment to one's opinion.

Demographic influences on attitudes included sex, in which women scored higher on average attitudes than men in the topics of gender, sexual orientation, and sexual coercion. Self-described religious background was significant in that religiously conservative participants scored lower in attitudes about sexual orientation than liberals or those with no religious background. Women scored significantly higher regarding the gender topic on relevance to own life, in favorability toward the presentation, and level of affect.

Attitudes about sexual orientation and, to a lesser extent, sexual coercion changed over the semester in a direction of increased sensitivity to diversity and individual choice. Semester attitude differences were significantly higher than differences recorded for the single multimedia session early in the semester for sexual orientation, sex education, and sexual coercion, and for the single multimedia session late in the semester for sexual orientation. Attitudes were not influenced by affect or commitment to one's opinion, but attitude scores were significantly related to personal relevance, especially regarding gender and sexual orientation, life experience regarding sexual orientation, and favorability toward the class presentation for all topics. Repetitive exposure to information about sexual coercion was significant for higher attitude scores for participants reporting little prior exposure and considerable prior exposure, and lower attitude scores for participants reporting only some prior exposure.

Level of moral development, significantly higher for women regarding sexual orientation and sexual coercion, was significantly and positively related to overall attitudes about sexual orientation and sexual coercion.

Level of moral development scores were significant also regarding gender perspective-taking, favorability toward the class presentations on sexual orientation and sex education, repetitive exposure to a topic, distraction from the sexual orientation presentation, and cognitive effort exerted in considering the messages of the gender, sexual orientation, and sex education presentations.