Understanding the reality of terrorist attacks: Challenges & Opportunities in teaching the 2018 Toronto van attack

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Objectives:
1. Teaching about domestic terrorism using active teaching methods is challenging but rewarding.
2. An opportunity for active teaching about terrorism that exists is using field excursions to explore relationships of physical and social vulnerability at the specific locations of violent incidents.
3. Active teaching about terrorism challenges that exist include coping with the temporal distance from tragic events and strategic silence.

Abstract:
The recent uptick in domestic terrorism incidents prompts a need for effective active teaching methods considering violent events. If done carefully, observational fieldwork can be an approach for active teaching about terrorism. Pedagogy developed and implemented about the 2018 Toronto van attack will highlight opportunities / challenges in teaching terrorism.

Narrative on Structure for Panel:

Introduction: Relevance & Justification

During 2020 and 2021, the domestic terrorism threat in North America has risen to a new level of significance. Specifically, on January 27, 2021 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued a National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin stating that the drivers of violence for Domestic Violent Extremists (DVEs) include anger over COVID-19 restrictions, the 2020 election results, and police use of force (DHS, 2021). The January 6, 2020 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building highlighted an American version of that DVE threat. In addition, the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service in their 2019 public report emphasized the threat from Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremists (IMVEs) that is driven by a range of grievances and ideas from across the traditional ideological spectrum (CSIS, 2019). A 2018 vehicular ramming mass casualty attack in Toronto highlighted the Canadian version of the IMVE threat present. Across North America, the need exists now more than ever to effectively incorporate elements of domestic terrorism into university-level Disaster and Emergency Management.
and/or Homeland Security curriculum. The question is: How can we best meet this curriculum challenge? This panel will provide insights and strategies for active teaching and learning concerning domestic terrorism.

**Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Considerations**

Active learning has been found to have a greater positive influence on student learning as compared to traditional classroom teaching methods (Oros, 2007). In addition, interactive teaching methods are difficult to incorporate into teaching about terrorism for a variety of reasons such as adversity in handling the violent and gory content in teaching settings and difficulties in asking students to think like terrorists (Burcu, 2019). One form of active learning that has been applied in disciplines such as geography has been observational fieldwork that encourages active learning for students with faculty-led on-site visits (Kent, et. al., 1997). In the Disaster and Emergency Management discipline, participant-observation type fieldwork has also been encouraged through class projects and practicums.

With respect to The Next Generation Core Competencies for Emergency Management Professionals: Handbook of Behavioral Anchors and Key Actions for Measurement (Feldman-Jensen, et.al., 2017) the panelists will highlight two behavioral anchors relevant to the topic. First, the critical thinking anchor described in the 2017 handbook as “Flexible, innovative, adaptive thinking processes: Is alert to changing conditions, integrates new information, considers alternative tactics, and readily adapts approaches to the fluctuating disaster risk environment (Feldman-Jensen, et.al., 2017, p. 27).” Second, the geographic literacy anchor described in the 2017 handbook as “Recognizes the world is made of physical, built, and social systems, which interact in multifaceted ways, producing varying levels of risk and vulnerability, illustrates meaningful context for the interactions of the physical and social geography of a given location (Feldman-Jensen, et.al., 2017, p. 46).”

**What the Panel Will Address**

1. Teaching about domestic terrorism using active teaching methods is challenging but rewarding.

Transformation can take place in learning when ideas brought forward in the classroom challenge students to revisit, evaluate, and reconstruct their deep-seated opinions. Such reflection can prompt critical assessment and new ways of thinking about the world (White and Mindell, 2014).

Teaching about terrorism can be a transformational learning experience, however the challenges are many including difficulty in the use of interactive teaching methods. Learning about vulnerabilities, tactics, and motives does not necessarily mean that one must express sympathy for the perpetrators or approve of their actions. Yet, in cases of the study of terrorism, “Being educated on an issue requires considering all aspects of the phenomenon in their complexity, magnitude, and detail (Burcu, 2019, p. 4).”

Panelist Rozdilsky will address challenging but rewarding aspects of teaching about domestic terrorism.

2. An active teaching about terrorism opportunity that exists is using field excursions to explore relationships of physical and social vulnerability at specific locations of violent incidents.

This panel will use the example of the 2018 Toronto Van Attack to illustrate how field excursions can be used for participant-observation activities to explore the relationships of physical and social vulnerability. In this case, the relationship of physical and social vulnerability plays out in terms of teaching about soft target defenses.

Soft targets are generally defined as compared to hard targets, “To differentiate the degree to which vulnerabilities are mitigated or hardened (Matthews, 2017, p. 460).” Sites having characteristics of armed and highly trained security teams in place, strict access control, and physical barriers preventing incursions are hard targets. Sites that are public, with little security oversight, open access, and no physical barriers to prevent criminal or terrorist incursions are soft targets. To determine the degree to which a particular location is ‘soft’ requires a vulnerability assessment of the location (physical), and potentially an internal assessment with respect to processes and individuals (Matthews, 2017).
Panelist Snowden will comment on how a field excursion to the streets on which the Toronto Van Attack took place can be an effective teaching tool to explain the relationships of physical and social vulnerability at a specific location.

3. Active teaching about terrorism challenges that exist include coping with the temporal distance from tragic events and strategic silence.

The Toronto Van Attack occurred at a location approximately (8 kilometers or 5 miles) from the university. As this mass casualty attack was literally in the University’s neighbourhood, a challenge existed of how to teach the topic of the attack within the context of the ‘rawness’ of the trauma inflicted on the community. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, given the active community coping with the tragedy, it was not appropriate to organize small groups of students to take on a field excursion to the exact location of the vehicular ramming attack during a period of active grieving. However, as time passed memorials were put up and taken down and opportunities for mourning were made available with city sponsored events. This very passage of time allowed for some community healing to take place. As sidewalk-based activities eventually resumed at the very location of the tragedy, the temporal distance from the attack created a situation more appropriate to active learning in the streets where the attack took place.

Another challenge that existed was balancing sensitivities of strategic silence. Strategic silence is a complex debate in both journalism and academic circles concerning when it is appropriate to downplay the names, images, and ideologies of perpetrators of mass crime (Lankford and Madfis, 2018). To teach about terrorism events, an evidence-based factual approach is needed to establish the circumstances of the events. Yet can such coverage of a violent event through teaching inadvertently result in disseminating the methods and aims that the extremists seek to spread? Individual teachers will have to make their own determinations of how to treat the topic of strategic silence, or not.

Panelists Rozdilsky and Snowden will both address the challenges in teaching about domestic terrorism.

The Van Attack Case

This panel will draw from research and teaching experiences from 2018 to 2020 as related to the Toronto Van Attack. While this panel’s purpose is to contribute to the wider knowledge of scholarship of teaching and learning for the specific area of Disaster and Emergency Management and Homeland Security teaching related to domestic terrorism curriculum, evidence-based conclusions will be drawn from the study of the van attack incident.

The Toronto Van Attack occurred on April 23, 2018 when an attacker in a rental van drove his vehicle down the sidewalks of Yonge Street with the specific purpose of killing as many pedestrians as possible. By the end of the attack, the attacker had been arrested by the Toronto police without incident after ten people had been killed and another 16 persons were seriously injured. This attack was unique in scope given the short-time elapsed and long-distance covered as the attacker raced down Toronto’s sidewalks and streets at high rates of speed. Even though the van attack was inspired by other terrorist vehicular attacks, governmental authorities did not consider this attack as a terrorism incident, it was treated as a mass crime. In the conclusion of the judicial proceedings in 2021, the attacker was found criminally responsible and guilty of all charges. The attacker was influenced by Incel ideology, although the specific rationale for the attack remains unresolved.

With regard to the lessons learned, a recognition of the pervasive threat of gender-driven violence needs to be investigated further, the failure of imagination considering the potential for future attack needs to be avoided, and security should be commensurate to the actual risk present (Rozdilsky and Snowden, 2021).

Another factor that needs to be understood is the concept of soft target vulnerability, especially comprehending both the number of potential soft targets in urban centres as well as understanding what efforts should be taken to reduce the potential risk associated with another vehicle attack. Clearly it becomes apparent that the effort to reduce the risks associated with soft targets is both a politically and economically overwhelming undertaking. Of course, all of these concerns have been placed upon the backburner due to COVID-19 issues. Prior to the pandemic, similar vehicular attack concerns existed with respect to large special events in North American cities. For example, during the 2019 NBA Raptors championship celebrations in Toronto’s city centre, crowd dangers existed, and lessons learned from the van attack were not fully applied.
Author Biographical Statements

Dr. Jack L. Rozdilsky is an Associate Professor for the Disaster and Emergency Management Program at York University in Toronto, Canada. Dr. Rozdilsky’s professional duties include research, teaching, and service in topics related to disaster social science, emergency management, and homeland security practice. He is the Graduate Program Director for the master’s degree program in Disaster and Emergency Management at York University. Some of his recent research includes a study of the 2018 Toronto Van Attack that was published in the Canadian Journal of Emergency Management. He is currently a co-investigator on a pandemic-related rapid research project that is sponsored by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research investigating COVID-19 related stigma. Prior to joining the faculty at York University, Dr. Rozdilsky was a university professor of Emergency Management in both Illinois and Texas. He holds a Doctorate in Resource Development and Urban Studies from Michigan State University.

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Mr. Edward Snowden is a graduate student in the master’s degree Program in Emergency and Disaster Management Program at York University. His area of research specialization is mass casualty incident management – pre-hospital response management, triage management, and post-hospital response. Previous academic experience includes a Honours BA in Specialized History with a primary focus on 19th century and 20th century American military history and a Master of Science in Project Management from George Washington University. His teaching experience includes project management at Sheridan College and acting as an Associate Professor at Conestoga College teaching in the project management program.

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References


