

Workshop with MMU students (1): Sexual learning.

Notes by workshop facilitator Ester McGeeney



On the 30th September 2019 Jayne Mugglestone (lecturer and former youth worker), Ali Ronan and I facilitated a workshop for students at Manchester Metropolitan University as part of a third year module on Health and Wellbeing. All the students are studying on the Youth and Childhood undergraduate programme. This was week two of the module.

We met Jayne early in the morning in the teaching room in Brooks building to set up for the session which runs 9-12pm. Jayne had been feeling worried about the session and was concerned that our decision to do a workshop on sex and relationships in week two of the module was a good idea. In week two students wouldn't know her, or each other, very well or have got used to working together as a group. The previous week Jayne had introduced the topic and let students know what would be happening. A few of the students had come to talk to her after the session to say that they were concerned about the topic, because of their religious values – some Christian, some Muslim. Jayne was feeling nervous about doing the workshop and concerned that some of the South East Asian women in particular wouldn't turn up. This mirrored the nervousness of another of the youth workers we have worked with who was concerned about how the young women in her group – from 'strict' Muslim and Christian backgrounds – would respond to the WRAP material. As we were setting up for the session however some of the students who had approached Jayne the previous week turned up and Jayne could relax.

This was a large group of over twenty students with nearly every chair in the room being used. There were six tables of students with 2 – 5 students at each one. They are a mixed group of white, black and Asian students, all born between 1997 and 1999. (We know this because we started by all students introducing themselves and the year that they were born). All the students are female, except for one male student. He identified as gay in the session and talked about feeling like there was no space for him in the RSE curriculum. No other students identified their sexuality / sexual identity during the session, although one woman talked about her boyfriend.

Jayne introduced Ali and I and explained what the topic of the session would be on (Relationships and sexuality education - RSE) and outlined why this was an important topic to cover and that it has relevance to all areas of work with children and young people. Jayne drew on examples from her own practice in working with young people in care who had never been given any information about puberty or bodies because they kept moving placement and no-one saw it as their responsibility to have conversations with these young people about RSE.

We started with an activity called *What Jars you?* (Taken from the AGENDA resource created by Emma Renold). We hadn't planned to do this but decided to as Jayne noted some nervousness the previous week about talking about sexuality. The task was to write '*what jars you about talking about sex and sexuality*' on post it notes and stuff these into a jar. There weren't enough jars so the students had to share. I went round and spoke to two tables at this point. At the first table the students told me that nothing jars them. They said they are very open about the topic and they are happy to talk about it. They talked about the importance of RSE and of talking about these issues. This was a mixed table – the young white gay guy, two white girls and two Asian girls who weren't wearing headscarves. The other table had one black girl and three Asian girls – two wearing head scarves. On this table two of the girls talked about the fact that they don't talk about sex and sexuality at home or with friends. This is something they don't talk about. One girl opted out of the research and did not consent to having notes written about her so I will exclude her from the rest of my account. The black girl on the table said that she has grown up talking about these issues so it is different from her. The silence around sex and sexuality was referred to in relation to upbringing and family. It took a while for us to name culture and religion as important factors. There was reference to the current protests in Birmingham (in 2019) around the teaching of LGBT relationships to Muslim children but we didn't have time to explore this in much depth. The protests were evoked quietly – for some of the young women as an example of why it is hard to talk about sex and sexuality within Muslim communities and by one as an example of why we shouldn't be having this conversation at all.

Students weren't asked to share the contents of their jars. They could choose to take their jars with them or leave them on the tables if they were happy for us to read their contents. Most, if not all, left them. I read them after the workshop, expecting to find examples of what the students find difficult about *talking* about sex and sexuality in a classroom or professional context (as this was the context of our conversation prior to the activity). Students took up the activity in a different way, sharing examples of their own fears and concerns about sex and sexuality – their own ignorance, experience of abuse and fears of

being touched, not enjoying sex or of getting pregnant. They also wrote what jars them about the politics of sexuality - the lack of education, social taboos around sex, restrictive religious and cultural norms, gender inequality.

What jars you about talking about sex and sexuality?

(some young people shared a jar)

Jar 1

Lack of knowledge / ignorance
 Difference in standards and expectations of males and females
 Cultural norms
 Religious views

Jar 2

People don't really talk about their 'sex life' its taboo.
 Other people's judgement
 Religion
 Culture
 If you're a virgin because of religion, you might be scared (Painful experience)
 Embarrassment
 People may judge you
 Less knowledge on sex

Jar 3

Sexual abuse
 STD's
 The limited sex education lessons. Usually an untrained teacher
 The stupid 'sex' videos (animations) that aren't realistic in schools.

Jar 4

Being an older virgin

Jar 5

Not enjoying it
 Getting pregnant
 Touching me

Jar 6

Lack of education regarding same sex
 Gender inequality impressive and funny for boys. Girls should be ashamed and embarrassed.
 People act like it's the only thing that matters in a relationship
 There are other good things

Jar 7

Not knowing what to do

Jar 8

Abuse
 Religion
 Pressure
 Shame

We used young people's reflections on the activity, and what they find jarring about sex and sexuality to think about how we were going to create a safe space for working. We created a set of ground rules and explained how we would do this when working with children and young people. Next we talked about consent and asked whether the students wanted to take part in the session as a student or as a student-research participant. We gave students a consent form and discussed with them how they could opt in and out of the different forms of documentation we were doing. All the students were ok with us taking notes about the session and to us photographing the stuff that they made in the session, except for one. Lots of the students didn't want to be photographed so we didn't take any photographs of students, only of the materials that they created.

There is always a lot of setting up to do with this project before we can get going. As well as introducing ourselves we needed to explain what the Reanimating data project is, what the WRAP project is, share some historical information, socio-political context and images from the 1980s, explain what the Western AIDS crisis was (the students didn't know), explain what the #metoo movement is (they didn't know) and then outline what we wanted to do in the 2.5 hour session ahead of us. This is on top of talking about consent and starting to deliberately create a safe space for working together.

1989



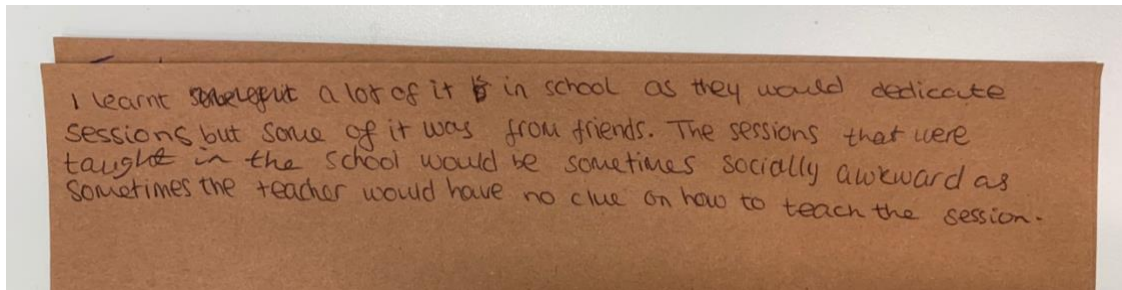
2019



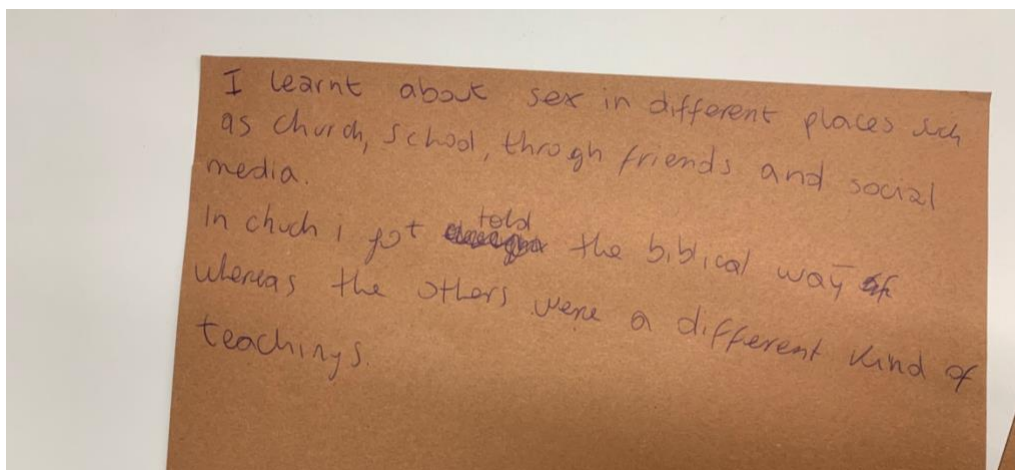
I showed some images and talked briefly about the 1986 'Don't die of ignorance' campaign, 'Section 28' and the Gillick case and Fraser guidelines. I referred to the #metoo movement, Jimmy Saville and recent legal cases involving historic sex abuse and the current protests in Birmingham about the teaching of LGBT relationships in schools.

Finally we were ready to start the main creative activity of the session, which used free-writes and collaging to explore participants views on what is changing for young people when it comes to learning about sex, sexuality and relationships. It felt like it had taken a long time to get to this 'starting' point but it also seemed important to go slowly and carefully. I was mindful of the workshop on creative and live methods that Rachel and I had done earlier in the year at Sussex University as part of a postgraduate research methods module. We had given very little time and space to explore the potential discomfort around speaking out about sex and sexuality and the cultural differences at play in a university classroom. The students had managed without any careful handling of the topic but it felt uncomfortable and didn't create much space to discuss how culture and faith shape our engagement with sexuality and with the WTAP archive – although there was much laughter about the difference between what can be said about sex and sexuality in an African, compared to a Sussex university classroom.

We started the creative work by asking students to talk to a partner about what and how they learnt about sex, sexuality and relationships. E.g. What have you learnt about sex, sexuality and relationships in your life? How did you learn? What didn't you learn / Where were the silences? Once pairs had finished their conversations they were asked to individually speed write for 2 minutes about 'sexual learning'. They couldn't write about their own experiences, their conversation with their partner or their views on the topic. They were told that they wouldn't have to share this with others if they didn't want to. Many of them were happy to share and let me take some photos.



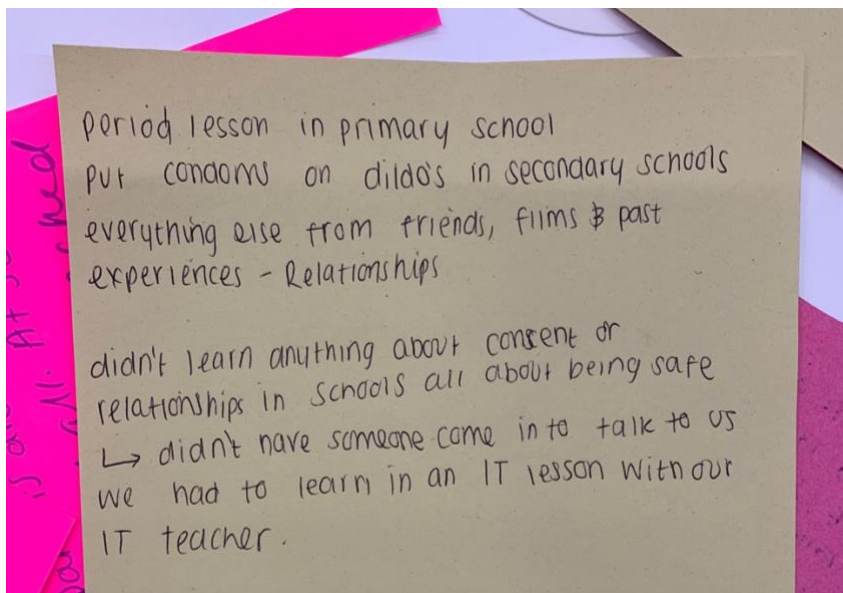
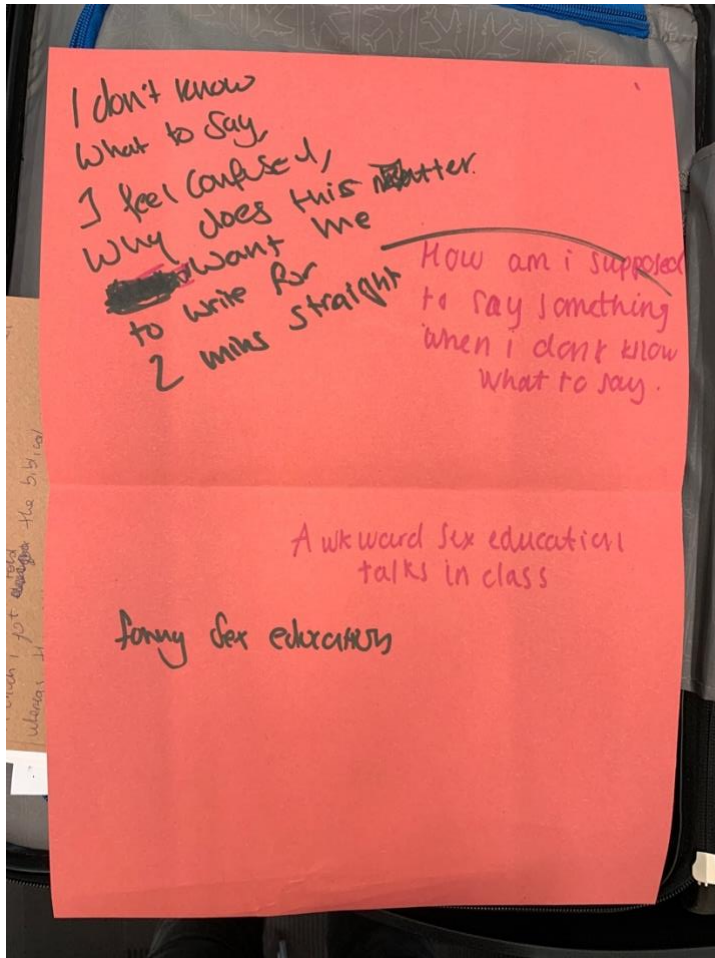
I learnt ~~some~~ a lot of it ~~in~~ in school as they would dedicate sessions but some of it was from friends. The sessions that were taught in the school would be sometimes socially awkward as sometimes the teacher would have no clue on how to teach the session.



I learnt about sex in different places such as church, school, through friends and social media. In church I got ~~taught~~ ^{told} the biblical way of whereas the others were a different kind of teachings.

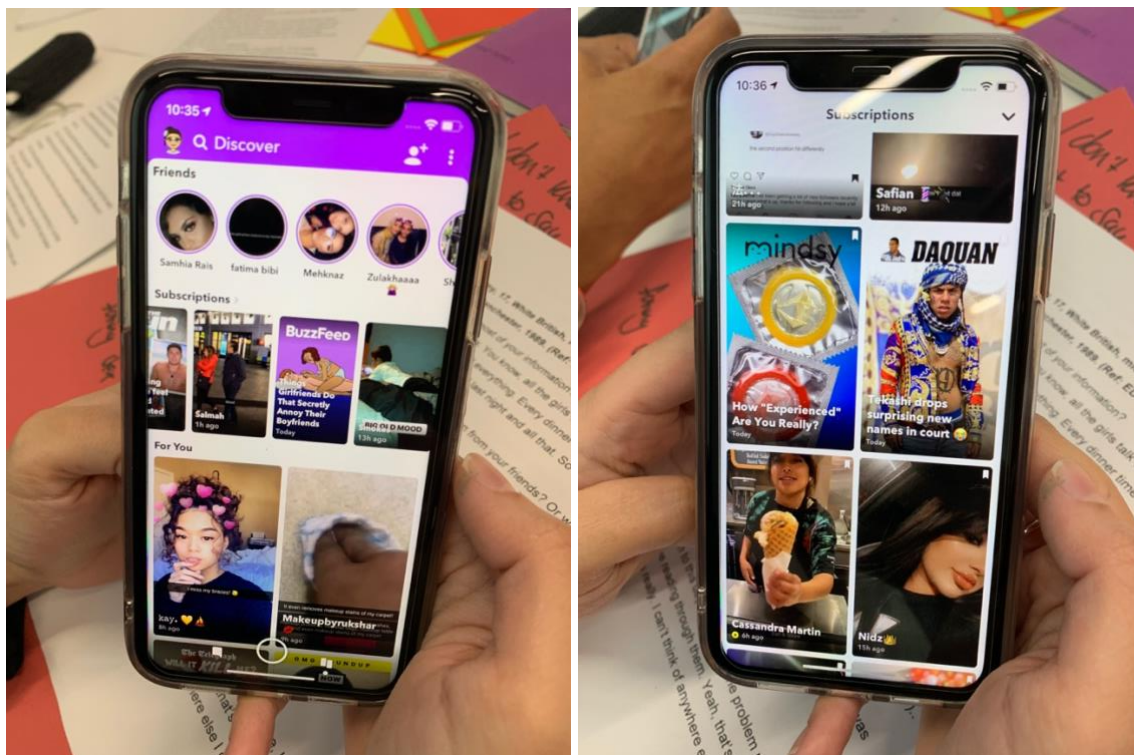
Parents, Sex wasn't talked about at all. For School, Primary, boys and girls separated and it consisted of a tampon in a tube of water. High school PSHE, rubbish animation and it was shocking. Friends spoke about sex at points. I think mainly boys in high school were watching porn and talked about it a lot of the time.

- School briefly covered things
- Teen magazine had a section
- Parents did not speak about it much - Sex before marriage is wrong.
- Most of the things I know are from talking to friends
- I don't know much about some sex relationships - particularly between girls because jokes about 2 boys



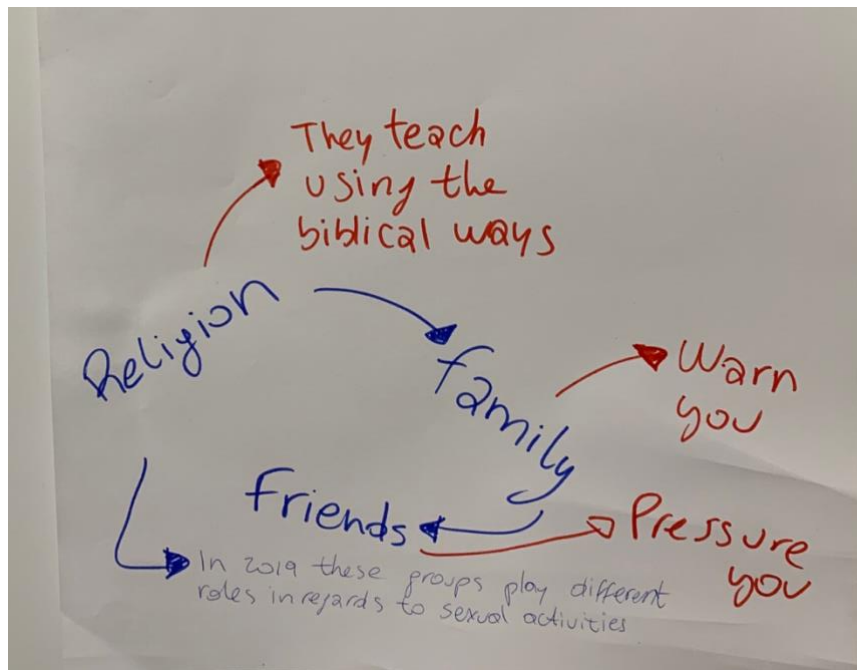
The speed writes that I saw suggest that school-based RSE has been patchy for this group of young people – largely consisting of isolated lessons on specific topics which are often embarrassing, awkward or jarring for young people. They also show that school is just one place where young people learn about sex and relationships – with friends, parents, media and religion also being important sites of learning. Some described learning from just one of these sites, where as others talked about the ways in which these different sites clashed and

intersected with each other. Two south East Asian young women told me that they only really learnt about sex and sexuality and relationships from social media – Instagram and snapchat – as they rarely discussed the topic with friends and never with family. They said that they would see articles pop up on their news feed or in the discover / explore section of the app and would sometimes click on them. We looked at their phones to see what kinds of articles were there on that day. We saw two examples that appeared on their news feeds - 'How experienced are you really?' and 'things girlfriends do that secretly annoy their boyfriends'. The young women said they found these kind of articles useful and interesting as a way of learning about sex and relationships. We talked about the fact that they had no choice over what appeared in their news feeds but choice over what they clicked on, open and decided to read. This wasn't the same at school, where they had no choice over whether they could take part in an RSE session or not.

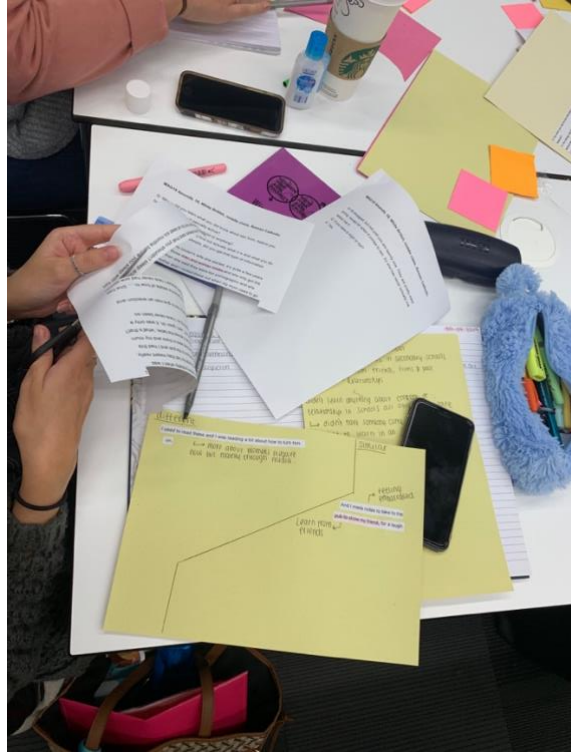


In another discussion with a West African and south east Asian young woman the West African young woman describe how she learnt about sex and relationships from her friends, her parents, school sex education and her church. For her these different sites were different, but complementary. She never had a burning question inside her that she couldn't get an answer to because if church wasn't telling her, she would ask her mum, if her mum couldn't answer she would ask her friends. She said that all these different messages and information would bump up against each other and sometimes contradict each other but ultimately she would always come back to what her mum said. You always come back to where you lie at night. She explained that a teacher can't slap you or punish you like your mum can – you live in her house so you ultimately have to listen to her rules and her way of seeing things. When I asked if that meant that the other messages and learning didn't matter, she said no – that she heard them all, they passed through and lodged in her brain somehow, even if she settled for now with what her mum tells her. She later had a go at

representing this through her collage. Her friend said that things were similar for her, even though her religion was different (Islam).



Next we put the written reflections / speed writes to one side and then looked at some [extracts from the WRAP study on sexual learning](#). Students were asked to choose an extract and read it several times, underlining things that stood out to them. Next they discussed the extracts with a partner. They were guided by two questions: (1) What has changed for young women in Manchester? (2) How do race, ethnicity, religion, class effect how we learn about sex? There was a feeling that the extracts 'could have been today'. One pair were confused because they thought that the extracts *were* from today, and not from the past. This has happened across the projects we have done in Manchester. Young women read the material as if it were today. They don't seem to see the interviews and the extracts as historical documents or 'archive material' but rather as a collection of women's voices that they can often relate to, or that they feel inspired by. After this the task was to create a collage that captured their thoughts about what is changing for young people when it comes to learning about sex and sexuality. Students could use the extracts, their own free writes, or create new material. They were given coloured paper, glue, coloured pens, scissors and crayons.

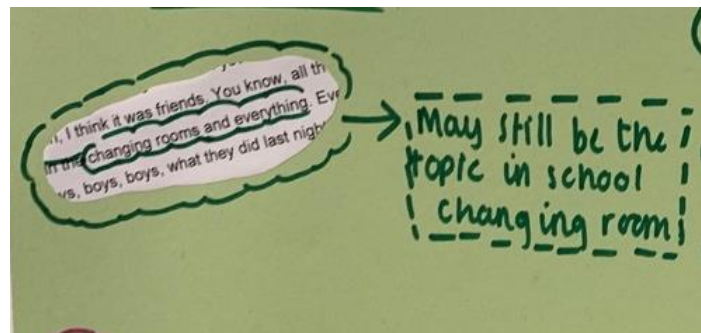


Students worked quickly and creatively, responding to the invitation to explore sexuality and social change in different ways. When the collages were finished we stuck them on to the wall and asked the students to gather round and talk about their collage.



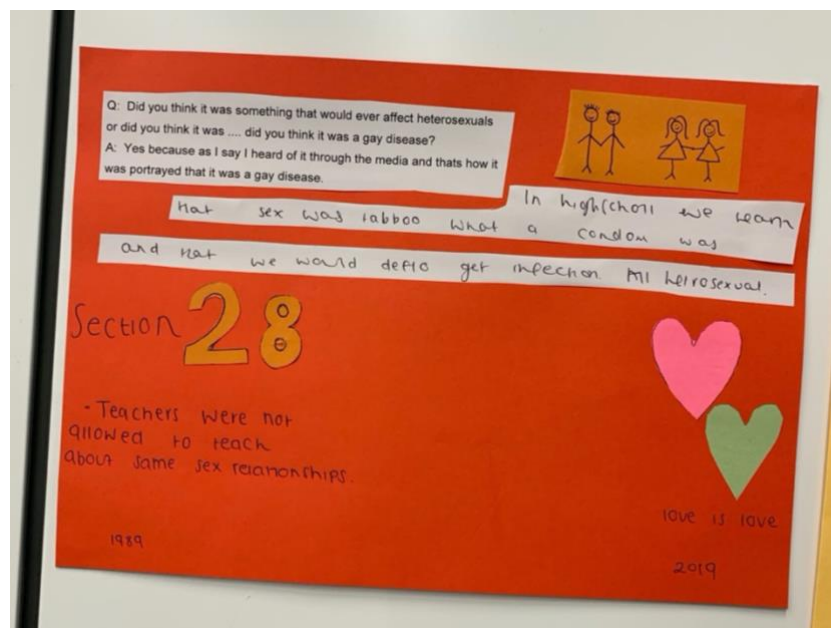
There were several key themes that emerged from the collages, and students discussion of them:

Friends are still a key source of information about sex for some young people. There is more openness between friends for some young people but for others sex is never discussed. Or as one young woman commented - there are some friends I would say anything to and some I wouldn't talk to about sex at all.



Relationships and Sex Education is still largely scientific – focussing on the biological aspects of sex and not discussing other areas such as emotions, relationships, consent and bodies. It is also still mainly heterosexual. It is still largely taught by female teachers.

The legal and policy framework around the teaching of homosexuality in schools has changed in the UK. There used to be 'section 28' and now there the *Love is love* movement. There is more openness around homosexuality now but it is still largely excluded from RSE which still focusses on heterosexual relationships. LGBT young people have to find out their own information. As M (young gay man) said – I felt like there was no space for me within RSE.



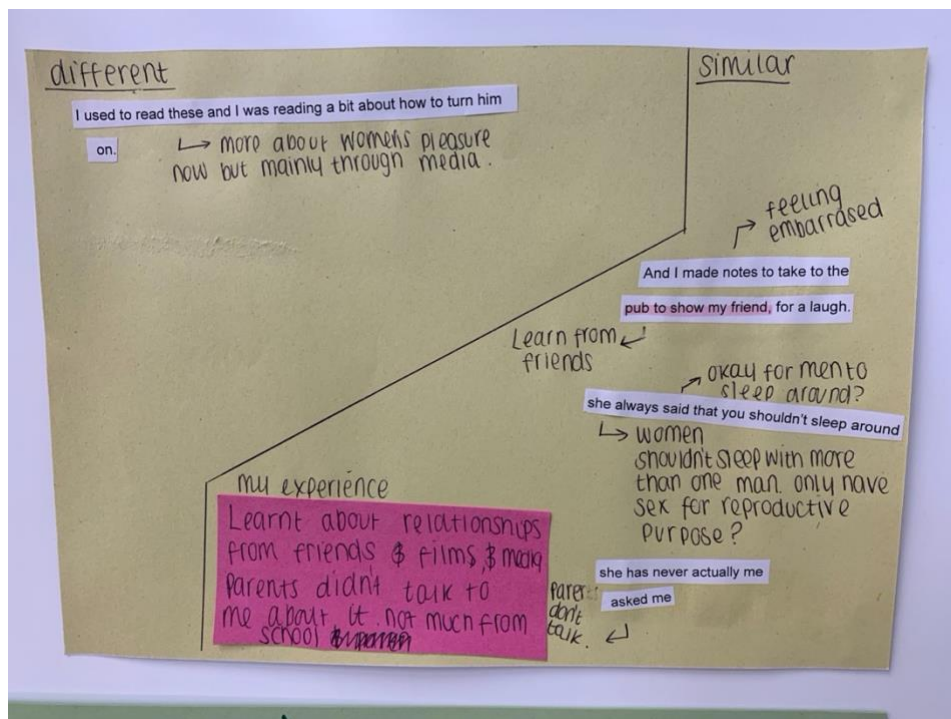
One young woman works at a clinic that does ultrasounds. She talked about a colleague who is shocked when LGBT couples come in for an ultrasound. She was well informed about S28 and the discourse around 'pretend families'.

Parents still don't really talk about sex to their children, although this varies between families and across cultures. One white young woman commented that her family would never talk about sex but that her boyfriend's mum is really open. They all walk around naked! – she told us.

Gender. It remains the case that women are judged more harshly than men for having sex.

Clinics. There are more sexual health services and charities to support young people and sexual health clinics are confidential for young people.

Media. One young woman commented that young people have always learnt about sex and sexuality from the media but we talk about this as if it is a 'new' phenomena. In 1989 young people were learning about sex from television adverts about HIV and AIDS and today young people learn from digital and social media, as well as television. The range of media and the content of media has changed however. She commented that AIDS would no longer be talked about in the media as a 'gay disease', but that female pleasure is still side-lined as it was in the 1980s. There are more media sources for learning about pleasure now (previously just women's magazines) but – she said – we don't learn about it. In a patriarchal society it is more accepted that men have sex.



Others in the group talked about other ways in which young people learn through the media. For example, through documentaries and YouTubers. One young person gave the example of Stacey Douley's documentary about brothels in Turkey where men visit sex workers because they don't know where to put their penis when having penetrative sex with a woman. Here the sex workers are the sex educators. Shan Boody [Shan Boodram] was mentioned as a YouTuber that some young people watch.

The group reflected that now there is so much more media to learn from – particularly from social media. This can be a pressure but it is an important source of information. For some this is their only source (see above). There is more about female pleasure in the media now and so many more sources than previously (just a few women's magazines). Porn is a source of education now for some young people.

Religion remains influential and important to how young people learn about sex, sexuality and relationships. Young people felt that things are changing within many faith communities, even though it can be hard to see this. One group said that a sexual health worker had started to come to their Mosque after lots of men started getting STIs from the extra-marital relationships they were having. The young women said that these men can't talk to the Iman about these relationships or about condom use as the men shouldn't be having these relationships in the first place.

After the session Jayne spoke with the students and asked them for feedback. She found that students had taken things away from the session for themselves and for their practice as future childcare / youth practitioners. In particular, the importance of access to information about sex and sexual health and the need to not be judgemental and understand difference. Students commented a lot on the creative methods we used, noting that they didn't feel like they were taking part in research and rethinking what it means to do research with young people. . Engaging in the method and one said it was really good as she didn't feel like she was taking part in research – I think this will help them when they are planning their own research project.

Comments from students:

'really informative and interestingly taught'

'Would like to know how to approach the topic with younger children and how to have appropriate conversations at the right time'

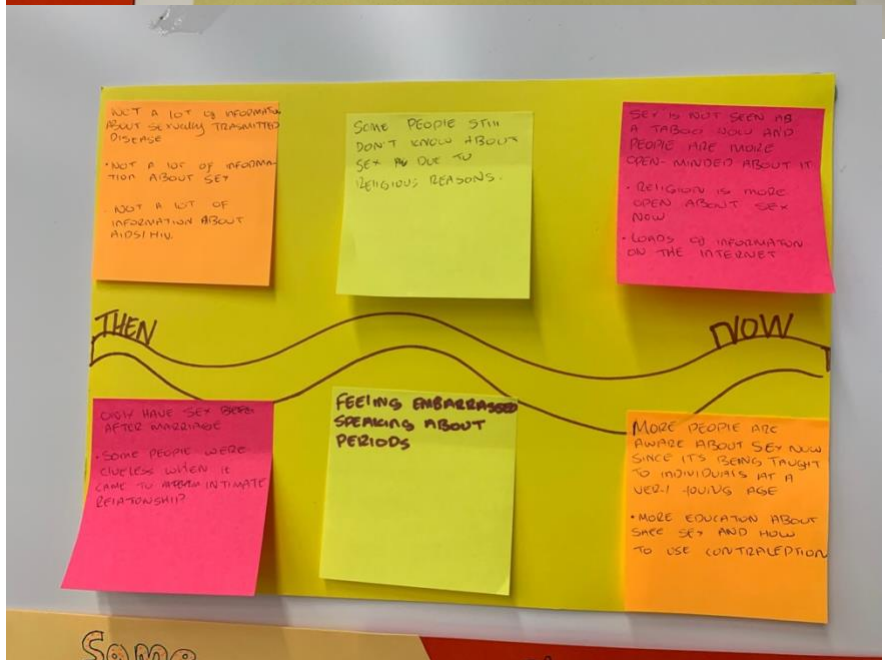
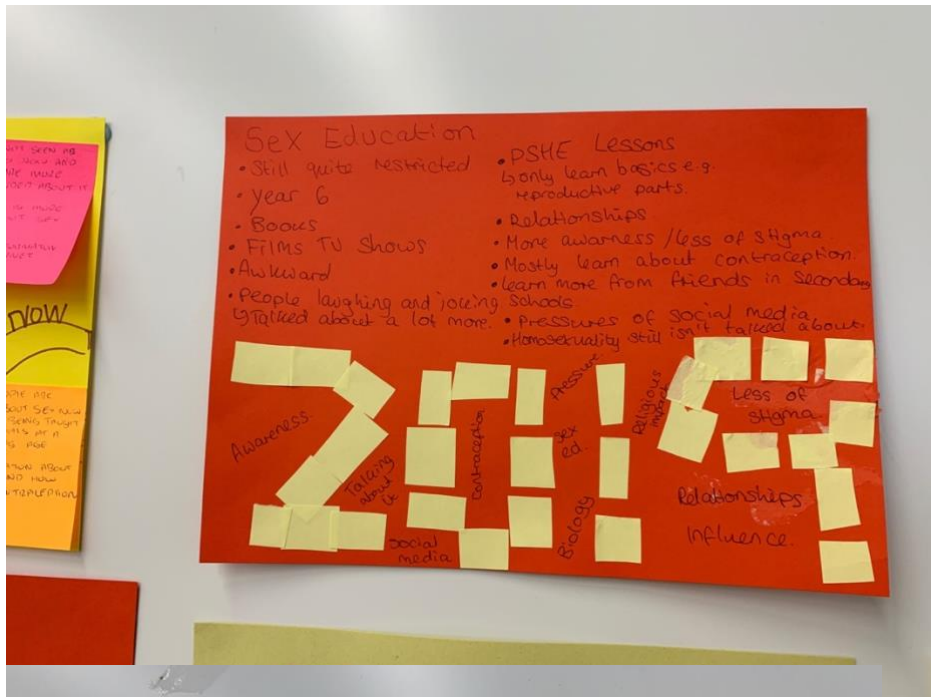
'Really interesting'

'Would like to know more'. '

'It makes you realise how important it is to do this'

'Much more interesting than I thought. Now thinking about being a sexual health worker'

Collages



The column on the left is then and the one on the right is now. The column in the middle is what hasn't changed – embarrassment about periods and not knowing about sex due to religious reasons.

From friends & films & media
Parents didn't talk to me about it not much from school

she has never actually me asked me
Parents don't talk

A lot of people had to find out through their peers

THEN


I think it was friends. You know, all the changing rooms and everything. Even us, boys, boys, what they did last night.

May still be the topic in school changing room!

* Some women may not have opened up about sexuality and sex.

LACK OF TRANSPORT

* Women and men may not have access to clinics due to lack of transport.



NOW

Women may feel more comfortable around sex topics!

(more knowledge, talked more about in societal)

SOCIAL MEDIA

* More knowledge around sex education.

MORE OPENED FRIENDSHIPS

Let's talk about sex!!!

1989 → 2019

Q: Did you think it was something that would ever affect heterosexuals or did you think it was did you think it was a gay disease?
A: Yes because as I say I heard of it through the media and thats how it was portrayed that it was a gay disease.

That sex was rabboo what a condon was and that we would defo get infection. All heterosexual.

In high school we learn



Section 28

- Teachers were not allowed to teach about same sex relationships.

love is love

1989

2019

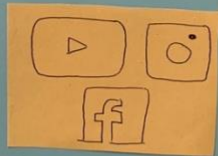





In 1989 there was no education about same-sex relationships. There is now more talk about it but not enough.

ॐ ☾ +

Sex can be a difficult conversation within some religions. Even if children have a family, it doesn't mean they will know about sex from them.



Now, there are more sources of media who talk about sex and relationships more freely - eg documentaries, YouTubers etc.

Same



- Female teacher conducting the lesson.
- Awkwardness

Religious impact



Homosexuality is still taboo / not talked about in sexual education lessons.



parental reluctance to speak about sex and sexual health.

Change



Social media → improve or perceptions, educational aspects



porn sites become a source of education → variety available.

Let's talk about it

Well...

more of a conversation surrounding sex and sexual health.

CHARITY

More outreach and support for individuals with sexual health questions + worries.

different

I used to read these and I was reading a bit about how to turn him

on.

↳ more about women's pleasure now but mainly through media.

similar

↳ feeling embarrassed

And I made notes to take to the

pub to show my friend, for a laugh.

Learn from friends

↳ okay for men to sleep around?

she always said that you shouldn't sleep around

↳ women shouldn't sleep with more than one man. only have sex for reproductive purpose?

she has never actually me

asked me

parents don't talk. ↙

my experience

Learnt about relationships from friends & films, & media. Parents didn't talk to me about it. not much from school ~~parents~~

General Conversations with friends & family about sex. To find out what it actually is.

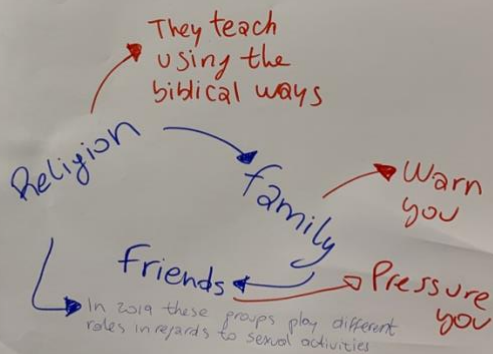
Q: So when you had the sex education at school was it done in biology lessons?

A: No biology was like diagrams and the very technical side of it. The actual lessons we had were much more to do with contraception and what happens. You were never told how to make love or whatever, it was very much how to stop getting pregnant and that sort of thing and about family planning clinics. Nothing about abortion. Masturbation was like a dirty word. It was for me until I came to university because it's a word I can use and I can relate to it now which I couldn't before.

1989 → 2019

AN: We had one video and that was of a girl having a baby. That was it.

LD In 2019 they would show the build up to giving birth. HOW! Show the whole process of labour, birth and also what role the man plays in the pregnancy.



See above for details of discussion with E and her partner that led to the creation of this collage.

