

Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices

The years when the COVID-19 pandemic began and following have not turned out the way that anyone imagined. Many of us continue to experience anxiety due to the uncertainty of the coming months. Neither you nor your students is sure what happens next. A variety of experiences are producing or re-activating trauma, including senseless deaths, loss of a Spring semester that we envisioned in 2019, loss of the pre-pandemic world, perhaps loss of loved ones. So responding to ourselves and our students using trauma-informed teaching and learning practices can help.

What is trauma?

"Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social emotional, or spiritual well-being." (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Health Resources and Services Administration 2014).

Some students, faculty, and staff will experience the COVID-19 pandemic and social responses to it as trauma. This response depends on how they have responded to past trauma and the existence of other traumas in their pasts.

"Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think." Source: Van Der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Given the widespread nature and possibility of trauma, incorporating trauma-informed practices in teaching can help to encourage student learning and increase resilience.

Teaching from a *trauma-informed* perspective is to understand the ways in which violence, victimization, and other traumatic experiences may have impacted students' lives and to apply that understanding to course design and delivery so that they accommodate trauma survivors' needs and are consonant with healing and recovery (Butler, Critelli, & Rinfrette, 2011; Harris & Fallot, 2001; N. J. Smyth, 2008).

Importantly, trauma may *explain* a response. Trauma does not *excuse* an inappropriate response.

Trauma-informed teaching and learning relies on five principles.

- Safety
- Choice
- Collaboration
- Trustworthiness
- Empowerment

Using these principles can support you as you build courses and respond to students.

As faculty think about building their courses, building in these five elements can encourage students to build resilience.

Building for **safety** involves guidelines for appropriate interactions as well as transparency and consistency so that students know how to behave, what to expect, and how their work will be evaluated.

Examples:

- In the "Start Here" section of your course, for example, you might include an explanation of what you will expect in written responses: No text-speak? Complete sentences? Professional tone? Professional language? No name-calling? No personal attacks? Whatever you say, be sure that you are willing to enforce those policies.
- For each assignment, indicate what course outcome students are working toward. Explain how you will evaluate the students. If the "how" of product is as important as the "what," be sure to indicate that and demonstrate "how" as well.
- If you haven't used a rubric to show students how they will be evaluated, then using a rubric is a great first step to letting students know how you will assess their work. If you already use rubrics, re-examine them, looking for places where you could be more clear about what you expect them to show you.
- Set up a routine that you follow regularly. The predictability supports all learners and helps them to move between sections and modules in your course.

Building for **choice** involves providing multiple ways into the material. If a student begins to re-engage a trauma, then that student can engage material in another way that does not exercise the previous trauma and does not continue a trauma.

Examples:

- Tell students what outcome/skill/knowledge they should demonstrate. Offer multiple ways to demonstrate these outcomes/skills/knowledge, for example produce a poster or write a short essay. Diagram this process or provide a process narration.
- For a course content, offer a reading and a video. Students can learn the material either by reading or by viewing the video. Students may then demonstrate that they have completed the content portion of the work by completing a short quiz, for example.

Collaborating with students in creating the course can add meaning and ownership for the students, making it more likely that they will continue with the course. Students are unlikely to suggest instruction or evaluation methods that they will find re-traumatizing, and those methods are often creative, yielding new techniques for the instructor that may enliven the course or the instructor as well.

Examples:

- Ask students what they find most confusing about the day's materials? Take the best of those questions, and use them to guide the lecture portion of the class.

- Ask students what they think the class should cover that day. Start a list of ideas on a white-board, chalk board, or chat. Use the list as a guide to the content you cover in the class or module. If you are running a hy-flex classroom, use the list as a way to keep the synchronous and asynchronous groups together. Asking students what you should cover gives them a sense of collaborating with you to build the class.

Trustworthiness is teaching behavior that works for all students. Ensure that you do what you say you will do when you say that you will do it. Communicate clearly with your students. Be transparent so that they know what to expect from you. Encourage them to communicate clearly with you so that you know what to expect from them. Build a communication channel so that if something unexpected occurs, you will be able to let them know and they will be able to let you know. Students may not realize this, but academic integrity is a trustworthy behavior. Cheating actually reduces the trust level in a class, and instructor responses necessitated by cheating may traumatize other students.

Examples:

- Use the "announcements" feature in Blackboard for your class. Tell your students that you plan to use this feature so that they check the announcements regularly.
- Use post-it notes for yourself. If a student asks a question that you need to check on in order to respond, write the question down. Then return to it in a future class, showing the students that they can trust you to return to their questions.
- "Sandwich" your course modules. Begin with an overview; provide the content/learning experience; end with a review. Clearly connect information from overview through content to review.

Courses that are built to **empower** students give them real opportunities to direct their learning and to explore what interests them. Students are correspondingly empowered to avoid material that can be problematic for them. Empowering students may also include multiple attempts at learning material with different ways to approach the material if one approach proves ineffective.

Examples:

- Test for what students know rather than what they don't. Give them opportunities to build a timeline of discoveries, for example.
- Ask students how they can best demonstrate their knowledge: present a poster (could be a well-designed slide); collaborate with classmates to conduct periodic review sessions for course material; use course material to solve a real-world problem.
- Ask students to propose a project for themselves or a team as an assessment.

Courses that include these five elements—safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment—support all students in learning and building resilience.

*One note of caution: a significant difference exists between material that is challenging and difficult intellectually and material that is truly traumatic for students. In an effort to avoid material that challenges long-held beliefs, students may claim trauma. Trauma elicits functional impairment, while challenging, difficult material is unlikely to impair function.

For additional information regarding trauma-informed teaching, consider [these resources](#). Some are focused around the 2020 election; others have more general direction.