Trauma Informed Teaching

Trauma-informed teaching and learning require having a keen awareness of our students’ past and present experiences and the effects of those experiences on their well-being. This does not mean all faculty need to become mental health experts or therapists. Instead, if we want our students to learn, we must recognize trauma in ourselves and our students. Fundamentally, we want to help them feel safe, empowered, and connected.

A trauma-informed critical pedagogy enables us to recognize that amid a pandemic and the almost daily videos showing state-sanctioned violence against Black and Brown bodies, our students may have a difficult time completing basic tasks they normally would. This includes keeping track of changes in our classes, making decisions about their learning, being motivated to study or to show up, prioritizing assignments, engaging with classmates or the subject, managing their time, or even persevering in our classes.

Creating relationships and making students feel connected to you and the course(s) you’re teaching can be challenging during “normal” times—let alone during the current state of our local, national, and global events. It can be difficult to know how to effectively address these issues, especially in the virtual classroom. These suggestions are intended to help you provide every student with the support and validation they need during this critical time. Different students may need unique forms of support and connection; what works for one student may not work for another. Here are five principles based on Shannon Davidson’s Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide. These principles are designed to intentionally mitigate the negative impact that community and individual trauma pose to our students’ learning.

Work to ensure your students’ emotional and cognitive safety. When the brain is under traumatic stress, it goes into survival mode—prioritizing and conserving energy just to stay alive. Learning, which requires the expenditure of energy, becomes physiologically less of a priority to our brain (van der Kolk, 1994; Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007). One way to help our students learn is to help them feel safe and comfortable in our learning environments. Consider empathizing with your students to reinforce the notion that we are in this together. Share with your students how you are handling the current situation. Ask your students how they are doing. Ask them what safety means to them and how you can make them feel safe in your course. Reassure students that academic challenges and concerns about belonging are normative, and do not signal a lack of fit or academic potential.

Focus on creating and maintaining trust. Temper adverse effects of insecurity and uncertainty by helping students find meaning and connections in your class. Intentionally articulate how each assignment relates to the learning objectives and be transparent in detailing the steps required to complete each assignment. You promote trust when you are clear with your intentions, instructions, and evaluation criteria, and they are reliable in grading based on your communicated criteria.

Focus on creating and maintaining mutual connections between students. Amid ongoing trauma and stress, fostering peer support is a vital way to promote community. Social distancing need not interfere with social interaction. You can encourage relationship building among your students by using breakout rooms in Zoom or suggesting that students form virtual study/discussion groups outside of class. You can ask your students to share their own coping strategies with each other to help them find solutions to concurrently cope with stress and advance academically. Explicitly tell your students that making social connections benefits not only the people we make connections with but ourselves as well.

Empower students. Allow your students to share power and decision-making. Invite your students to tell you what interests them, what they want to learn about in your course, and what matters most to them now. Integrate their ideas into your content and communications to students. Seek out guidance from
students. Bell Hooks argues that we should “make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership” (Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope). In traumatic times our students’ lives may feel like they have lost a sense of control or agency in their own lives. Validate and normalize student concerns by talking about fear, stress, anxiety, and trauma. Use a short survey to ask your students, “How can I help you learn during these difficult times?” Cultivate a classroom space where students are empowered to co-create meaning, purpose, and knowledge.

Pay attention to cultural, historical, and racial issues. Use an intersectional lens when considering the challenges your students are facing. If we treat our students as if they are all the same, we are actively choosing to ignore the barriers they may face. We inadvertently erase parts of our students that are integral to their identities. As educators, we also want to be careful not to amplify our student's trauma. It is important to consider how racialized communities may experience trauma more severely due to intergenerational traumas, ongoing oppression, and marginalization. Many of our students, as well as our colleagues, experience traumatic stress from microaggressions on a daily basis. Microaggressions affect their biological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral well-being. Dedicate time to learning what microaggressions are and how to respond to microaggressions in online environments. Commit to understanding biases related to your discipline or course content. Learn about knowledge and practices that have been excluded historically in your discipline and consider supplementing your course content with this additional knowledge. Finally, continue to learn about and implement equitable and antiracist teaching strategies and assessments.