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Special Summer Teaching Toolbox: A Pandemic Pedagogy
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Special Summer Teaching Toolbox
A Pandemic Pedagogy: Trauma-Informed Teaching Meets Healing-Centered Engagement
by Cara Meixner

[From Emily O. Gravett, curator and sometimes-author of the CFI's Teaching Toolbox series: Typically, we take a break from the Toolboxes over the summer because so many faculty are getting off email and scattering—to sandy beaches, to cooler climes, to family cookouts, to neglected research. This year is obviously different. The ever-wise Liz Thompson in Libraries recognized that some topics may be important for us to consider before the fall. So we will send out a few special summer Toolboxes over the next several weeks, including the one below by Cara Meixner and one soon on OER by Liz. We hope these are helpful to you at this time.]

A plight of our times, the novel coronavirus has brought with it a host of new and newly conceived terms, ranging from "quarintinis" to "social distancing" and "contact tracing." Among the many constructs to take on new meaning is that of "psychological trauma"—a diffuse, often misconstrued phenomena bearing significant relevance not only to the lives of our students and colleagues (particularly those from historically underrepresented backgrounds), but also to our own. What follows are ways we can adapt trauma-informed and healing-centered pedagogical principles to our teaching and to our broader lives as we look ahead to an uncertain fall.

Many entities have defined trauma, among them a holistic, inclusive conceptualization from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being." The notion of "experience" is important for us, as educators, to unpack. First, no one person's lived experience is equivalent to that of another. Further, what may appear minor, such as a student's disdain over a seemingly innocuous change made to an assignment amidst COVID-19, may signal concerns far more debilitating (e.g., heightened stress on top of a pre-existing mental health condition, bolstered anxiety due to pandemic-related job loss, etc.).

Related, and considerably pertinent, is the felt, embodied experience of racism as trauma. Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis, of Pepperdine's Culture and Trauma Research Lab, notes the need to look at the long-term impacts of racism-based trauma just as we do with natural disasters, child abuse, and human trafficking. To add, Dr. Monnica Williams, a clinical psychologist who studies trauma in persons of color, unveils the psychological effects that invariably show up (or may even remain invisible to us) in our students: cognitive (e.g., intrusive thoughts, inability to focus, poor memory), behavioral (e.g., substance use, eating and sleeping problems), and emotional (e.g., shame, hypervigilance, anxiety). I recall the experience, many years ago, of reaching out after class to a Black student (who had arrived late, with bloodshot eyes) only to hear her harrowing story of the toll being a minority at a PWI had exacted. Offering me permission to share this account, this now-alumna noted that I was the first of her (white) faculty to "see" and "care" that something was awry.

A strong sense of "being written off" by her teachers as "lazy" only exacerbated her mounting experience of trauma atop trauma.

So, what do we do, particularly amid the multiple and intersectional traumas experienced by our students? Dr. Mays Imad (an educational developer and neurobiologist) leveraged disciplinary expertise, grounded in her own war-torn trauma experiences as a middle schooler during the Iraq War, to build a compelling, 7-step pedagogical model, within which I have infused additional opinions and timely resources.

1. Pay attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues. As noted above, racialized and underrepresented communities experience trauma in severe, enduring ways. Here Imad underscores the pertinence of five considerations, especially relevant for white educators: treat students equitably, not equally; recognize the persistence of racial trauma (at individual, group, and systemic levels); learn about microaggressions in the classroom; debunk our own "default framework and bias"; and commit to learning and applying antiracist and abolitionist pedagogies. Each semester, I utilize this inclusive syllabus design tool; it initially sensitized me, for instance, to the lack of diverse voices in readings I had assigned.

2. Work to ensure students' emotional, cognitive, physical, and interpersonal safety. Imad notes that this work begins with ourselves, remembering her mentor's advice that "we can't teach what we don't have." To be grounded in and sensitive to our students' experiences of trauma, we may want to reflect first on our own. (While doing so, practicing self-care is crucial!) If we've been fortunate not to have endured past traumatic experiences, we might contemplate our own biases, privileges, and spaces of empathy for others. Imad then suggests "revealing our own vulnerability," to the extent we are able, a premise expanded upon by JMU's own Edward Brantmeier in the newly published *Pedagogy of Vulnerability*. Additional CFI resources on helping students manage their stressors and crafting deliberately inclusive learning environments present concrete ideas for us to utilize in our teaching.

3. Foster trustworthiness and transparency. Fostering these two tenets, both of which are trauma diffusers, may start as simply as helping students find what Imad calls "meaning and connections" to the material. Dr. Janice Carello, a trauma expert and Social Work instructor, annotated this syllabus to showcase simple (yet very powerful) methods for doing so. An added resource that I use, also supported by Imad, is the well-evidenced Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) framework for assignments, proven especially efficacious for historically marginalized and first-generation learners.

4. Facilitate peer support and mutual self-help. The epidemic of loneliness, tied to a loss of sense of belonging, has been intensified by pandemic-related trauma. Natalie Kerr, JMU Professor of Psychology, who studies social connection and loneliness found, in a 2018 study, that one-third of JMU students feel alone. She also remarks on the amplification of anxiety (coupled with fears of contracting the virus) during COVID-19, which may exacerbate various types of loneliness. As instructors, we can create relational classroom spaces, even remotely, where students feel they belong—and are less alone. Dr. Flower Darby, author of *Small Teaching Online,* suggests considering three relational levels as we design remote courses: "the [relationship] you have with your students,

the one your students have with you, and the one the students have with each other." To begin, have students post introductions (text or video) and invite them to ask at least one follow-up question of other learners. (Post a video of your own, too!) To facilitate peer support that is authentic, consider alternative approaches to fostering discussions online. As Imad notes, "Remind your students that the connections we make with others not only helps them but ourselves, as well."

5. Share power and decision-making with students. Inspired by bell hooks, Imad argues for "liberating mutualities": settings that are "conducive to collaboration and the sharing of power between students and instructors." The learner-centered teaching literature offers concrete suggestions; one that I have adapted in my own courses is using exam wrappers and inviting paper revisions and resubmissions (after all, we are offered these opportunities in our own scholarship—why not extend this grace to students, too?). This recent crowd-sourced document on active learning while physically distancing, which also helps with #4, is gold dust for meeting this aim.

6. Empower voice and choice by identifying and helping build on student strengths. Simply naming that students are experiencing stress and trauma can create a sense of normalization (e.g., "I'm not the only one who feels this way!"). And, says Imad, that may return a lost sense of agency to our learners. In that agency, students can attend better to bolstering their assets. This is not to say that, as educators, learning deficits are to be ignored; we should still attend to limitations, helping students see clear pathways toward growth. (Among the many practices I have long-valued is writing a pre-course letter to my students, inviting them to respond to a survey where I learn more about their strengths as well as their learning edges. I then use these data to formulate student teams wherein each student's strengths can be leveraged accordingly.)

7. Impart to students the importance of having a sense of purpose. Finding meaning in our pain is a real thing; it's called "posttraumatic growth" and it's something we can help students identify in every class they take, regardless of subject matter. Acknowledging and naming trauma only goes so far; more valuable is our work in helping students discover where they excel, what drives them, and who will support them along the way. Create spaces, in discussions or assignments, where learners connect disciplinary material to their own budding expertise and experience.

As you consider trauma-informed and healing enhanced approaches, I invite you to engage with me (email, phone, or through Zoom) or to consult with a member of our teaching team. You may also appreciate the hour-long virtual workshop offered by Dr. Imad, which provides opportunities for deeper reflection and application.

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https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml