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Applying trauma-informed pedagogy to faculty development in times of crisis and uncertainty

Abstract

This workshop report describes the facilitation of and insights resulting from two sessions on applying the principles of a trauma-informed approach to working in educational development during times of uncertainty which took place at the 2021 Swiss Faculty Development Conference in Spring 2021. The goal was to bring an awareness to how pandemic-induced trauma is affecting both educators and students, and how educational developers can encourage inclusive teaching by embedding these principles into their own programming. Our recommendations expand on the existing work related to classroom practices by offering tips on how to model a trauma-informed approach through the lens of the seven principles from the Substance and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) when working with faculty members.

Keywords

educational development, trauma-informed pedagogy, inclusive teaching, faculty development

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1   Contextual background

COVID-19 is a unique and unprecedented event that has provoked pandemic-related trauma and stressors, which is intensified by not knowing when situations will get better, or the virus will no longer be a threat (HARPER & NEUBAUER, 2021). For some, these months of uncertainty have led to additional stress; for others, the pandemic has been classified as a traumatic experience. Stress arises from individual responses to events that are either isolated instances or ongoing cumulative effect situations. An event is traumatic when an individual feels that a physical or psychological injury is present in and, potentially, threatening his/her worldview (DULMUS & HILARSKI, 2003). The Covid-19 pandemic clearly meets both criteria, for example, people are stressed about their jobs, livelihoods, or families/friends, and the world as they know it (i. e., their worldview) has been shaken. However, it may be more suitable to refer to the Covid-19 pandemic as a crisis in which the "individual's trauma perception must progress to a place of understood instability, and disorganization due to an unresolved acute and chronic perceived stress" (DULMUS & HILARSKI, 2003, p. 30).

In the landscape of higher education, universities were faced with the unprecedented challenge of moving instruction online for "emergency remote teaching," resulting in chaos in the standard teaching practices and emotional stress beyond the typical hectic atmosphere of higher education. While designing a traditional online course typically takes, on average, 4 to 6 months, educators had to move their teaching online in less than a few days. Some of the immediate adverse effects specific to faculty members and higher education administrators are a disruption in cognitive processes, such as challenges with memory, concentration, planning, creativity, and learning, as well as negative thought patterns related to self, the world, and the future (HARPER & NEUBAUER, 2021). Neuroscience research reinforces the presence of these adverse effects, which can be long-lasting (IMMORDINO-YANG & DAMASIO, 2007).

For faculty developers and faculty members, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique challenge – managing the promised seamless transition from face-to-face learning to remote learning, while also coping with the pandemic-induced trauma they and their students were facing in real-time (PICA-SMITH & SCANNELL, 2020). In his keynote presentation for the Online Learning Consortium Accelerate

conference on September 20, 2021, Dr. Rajiv Jhangiani shared that "Anxiety influences pedagogical choice," and the need to adapt quickly to the emergency remote teaching magnifies this anxiety. Therefore, by bringing the discussion of trauma-informed educational practice front and center to our work, we are being intentional about the principles and practices that foster coping and resilience during any time, but especially during difficult times.

2 Bringing a trauma-informed approach to educational development

2.1 A workshop for the Swiss Faculty Development Network

On February 19, 2021, the University of St. Gallen hosted the annual Swiss Faculty Development Network conference in a virtual format. Our session – *Applying Trauma-Informed Pedagogy to Faculty Development in Times of Crisis & Uncertainty* – was accepted as a Disq Space Discussion, an interactive format designed to allow participants to reflect on concepts and apply them to their own work. There were two 60-minute rounds of Disq Space Discussions with different participants in each session. Each session was divided into two parts – an overview of trauma and trauma-informed educational practice with a mini case study and an exploration of the SAMSHA's seven principles for a trauma-informed approach with discussion and examples.

2.2 Discussion & considerations

For each of the seven principles of a trauma-informed approach, we provide a brief description of the principle, what the principle might look like when teaching and working with students, and how the principle can be applied to educational development activities based on the literature and participant contributions to the workshop activities. When appropriate, we distinguish between practices focused on individual interactions (i. e., teaching consultations) and group interactions (i. e., in workshops).

2.2.1 Principle one: Physical, emotional, social, and academic safety

This principle addresses that intentional efforts are made to foster an atmosphere of safety, respect, and belonging. When working with students, this involves making space to address the difficulties they might be facing during the pandemic, including an acknowledgment of their feelings and emotions and doing so in a way that balances these socio-emotional elements with covering course content. As faculty developers, we must also identify creative ways to adapt to the situations and uncertainty, while fostering an atmosphere of care for faculty (PICA-SMITH & SCAN-NELL, 2020). Based on the literature and the ideas from the workshop participants, we suggest the following practices:

– Consider the use of an empathy map to reflect on the needs (physical, emotional, social, and intellectual) of your learners (YANG, 2018). When we can relate to what faculty are doing, seeing, saying, thinking, and hearing in their work, it can impact how we structure our interactions with them.
– Emphasize assertive communication skills and use neutral language (CAREL-LO & BUTLER, 2018) (i. e., Welcome faculty at the start of a workshop, illustrate how they can participate, and encourage them to take breaks for self-care as needed).
– For group interactions: Incorporate check-in "icebreakers" at the start of sessions that help faculty get settled and set the tone for learning and exchange.

2.2.2 Principle two: Trustworthiness and transparency

This principle involves making expectations clear, establishing routines, and being consistent. Miscommunication or confusion over expectations can add stress to an already stressful environment (SAHU, 2020). When working with students, this might mean sharing class agendas in advance on the learning management system and creating routines and rituals, such as inviting students to participate in Exit Tickets at the end of a class. Based on the literature and the ideas from the workshop participants, we suggest the following practices:

– Prepare for and anticipate disruptions (i. e., technology, noise, loss of audio, care-giving responsibilities, necessary multi-tasking) (SHERWOOD, VANDE-USEN, WELLER & GLADDEN, 2020). How you respond to disruptions can model how faculty can handle disruptions in their own teaching environments.

– Review confidentiality policies to reassure that what is shared stays inside the discussion whether the context is a teaching consultation or a group discussion.
– Model the establishment of participation expectations at the beginning of a session (i. e., include a slide at the start of presentations with the agenda and the expected participation from attendees).

2.2.3 Principle three: Support and connection

This principle posits that students need different resources and support to help them be successful personally and professionally. When working with them, it can be helpful to provide links to resources (i. e., the University Writing Center, student services, tutoring services) in the course syllabus and have general check-ins to see how they are doing during the semester, both individually and collectively. Based on the literature and the ideas from the workshop participants, we suggest the following practices:

– Show that you care by connecting individually with faculty members, especially those who have indicated that they are struggling.
– Initiate discussions on or facilitate practices that promote self-care and model how faculty can do this with their own students (CARELLO & BUTLER, 2015). An example could be to dedicate the first five minutes of a workshop session to a guided meditation activity.
– Encourage faculty to build on existing connections they have with one another to share resources and informal support for one another.
– Promote faculty support services internally and outside of the institution (i. e., Employee Assistance Programs).

2.2.4 Principle four: Collaboration and mutuality

This principle involves identifying opportunities for providing input, sharing power, and making decisions that impact the learning environment. When working with students, this could mean asking them for feedback and illustrating how that feedback is being put into practice or inviting them to help update course policies and assignments. Based on the literature and the ideas from the workshop participants, we suggest the following practices:

- Be prepared on multiple roles and remain flexible. Focus on meeting faculty where they are in a given moment and working from that place (PICA-SMITH & SCANNELL, 2020), as opposed to setting goals or expectations that might not be realistic under pressure. Provide flexibility to address emerging needs and content (i. e., Crowdsource discussion ideas from participants).
- Encourage flexibility. Provide flexible alternatives to address emerging needs and content (i. e., crowdsource discussion ideas from participants).
- Approach questions or concerns from a community perspective. For example: How do we as a group want to address this? What does this mean for us as a community? How can we all support each other through this?

2.2.5 Principle five: Empowerment, voice, and choice

This principle considers the extent to which individuals and groups are empowered to make choices and develop confidence and competence. When working with students, this might mean building in choice, when possible (i. e., options for assignment formats) or by encouraging students to identify quick break tools (i. e., closing eyes, meditation, breathing techniques), that work best for them. Based on the literature and the ideas from the workshop participants, we suggest the following practices:

- Invite faculty to express their needs related to technology, resource and support formats, and other modifiable aspects of your programming.
- For individual interactions: In teaching consultations, offer more than one possibility and provide the knowledge and tools to have the faculty member decide how to move forward.
- For group interactions: Build in activities at varying levels – individual, small group, and large group – to permit varying degrees of interactions.

2.2.6 Principle six: Social justice

This principle asks learners to be aware of and responsive to their privilege and oppression and to respect one another's identities and experiences. When working with students, this might mean reminding oneself that each student may be facing different challenges outside of the classroom that impacts their academic work, and in turn, being empathetic to requests or accommodations. Based on the literature and the ideas from the workshop participants, we suggest the following practices:

- Ask faculty how they are feeling. Don't make assumptions that they are fine or that they are stressed.
- Investigate how faculty are impacted by situations and events (PICA-SMITH & SCANNDELL, 2020).
- Open up time and space for discussions on current events and ideas on how faculty can discuss these topics with their students (SHERWOOD, VANDE-USEN, WELLER & GLADDEN, 2020).

2.2.7 Principle seven: Resilience, growth, and change

This principle addresses strength and resiliency to promote growth and change. When working with students, this might mean practicing compassion by conveying warmth and support when communicating with students, using hopeful and optimistic language, and pointing out what was done well. Based on the literature and the ideas from the workshop participants, we suggest the following practices:

- Identify ways to share "small wins" (i. e., though faculty drop-in hours, on a virtual platform such as MS Teams). Capture and showcase these to the institutional community as appropriate.
- Encourage faculty to share their lived experiences with their peers, but also with their students (PICA-SMITH & SCANNELL, 2020). This can help everyone see where we have been as a community and how far we have come.
- Introduce reflective practices to help faculty ascertain the strength and resilience they need to be effective.

3   Reflections from the facilitators

While the principles of a trauma-informed approach might align with effective community-building practices that effective instructors incorporate into their teaching, the Disq Space discussions allowed us to add intentionality to this work and to frame the approaches more explicitly in the scope of faculty development work. It is also important to consider that this pandemic-induced trauma is ongoing, which requires us to be more agile and resilient to ongoing disruptions in our work and in our teaching environments.

An interesting area for further exploration resulting from the discussions is the concept of context and the role it plays in fostering a trauma-informed approach. Examples of this were discussed in relation to technology, for example using surveillance technologies during online exams. While some practices might have been implemented as a short-term solution during the pandemic, it might be useful to initiate a review of these practices.

4 Conclusions

Our session focused on two of the most relevant concerns in 2021, COVID-19, and the emotional impact this pandemic and other trauma can have on higher education faculty and students. We animated a rich discussion on the types of traumas that could affect higher education and shared best practices. While trauma-informed pedagogy is typically related to individual acts or moments in time, COVID-19 has been long-lasting and all-inclusive. No school, regardless of location, level, or reputation, was immune to the effects of the past year. In record time (sometimes in days), faculty and students have adapted (or were obliged to adapt) to online, or remote, or blended learning methods. What began in Spring 2020 as a joint effort to combat this pandemic together, the months that followed witnessed a new set of concerns such as demotivation, stress, and fatigue. The positive attitude that everyone was 'doing their best' was replaced by 'when will we go back to normal'? More than a year later, the results are still out. What will be retained? What will be pitched? What should continue as we move forward? In these times of crisis and uncertainty, we are no closer today to finding the answers or solving the problems. However, it is crucial to discuss trauma-informed pedagogy and demonstrate concrete solutions for dealing with them.

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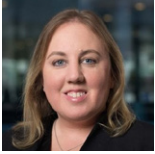
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