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Practice What You Teach: Trauma-Informed Pedagogy Through Experiential Learning

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Abstract

In this faculty spotlight, we will highlight two professors of education and their approach to teaching and modeling trauma-informed pedagogy. In their courses they are teaching pre-service teachers about trauma-informed pedagogy and taking intentional steps to build spaces within their higher education classrooms that are also trauma-informed. This allows students to experience what trauma-informed instruction feels like in practice. Additionally, these professors worked together to blend their two courses and involve members in the local community to prepare pre-service teachers with a greater connection to the local communities in which they will student-teach and potentially one day work..

Keywords: Trauma-Informed Pedagogy, Institutions of Higher Education, Pre-Service Teachers, Teacher Education

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The process of healing traumatic wounds does not only occur in the mental health sector. Healing is an inclusive effort, including but not limited to teachers, healthcare professionals, community members, and family. As therapy is not always accessible, it is imperative to find other ways to infuse trauma-informed approaches in our everyday spaces. For example, school is one of the most consistent, stable elements of our daily lives and students have the right to a free and

appropriate education. Trauma-informed pedagogy can help transform schools into an accessible, protective factor for youth, educators, and their respective communities.

In this faculty spotlight, we will highlight two professors of education at an urban teaching college and their approach to teaching and modeling trauma-informed pedagogy. Their university is committed to serving a diverse population of students from multiple demographics. These professors instructed pre-service teachers about trauma-informed pedagogy through the conduit of a trauma-informed classroom. This allowed students to experience what trauma-informed instruction felt like first-hand while also learning about its tenants. Additionally, the professors combined their two courses and invited a local hip-hop artist, poet, DJ, and community activist to provide pre-service teachers with a greater connection to the local communities in which they will student-teach and potentially one day work.

Prevalence

Trauma, by definition or diagnosis, is widely prevalent in the public and spans all demographic groups. Trauma has been cited as a public health problem given its potential, insidious, long-term effects on all aspects of human well-being, including psychological, emotional, neurological, physiological, and social elements (SAMHSA, 2014). Nearly 64% of adults in the United States report having gone through at least one Adverse Childhood Experience [ACE] (Swedo et al., 2023) with an additional amount who first encounter one or more traumatic events in adulthood. While trauma can affect anyone, the prevalence of certain types of traumatic experiences (e.g. child neglect, domestic violence, assault, hate crimes) differ between historically marginalized and dominant groups (Pumariega et al., 2022; Subica & Link, 2024). The prevalence of community and historical trauma, such as violence, poverty, colonization, enslavement, genocide, racism, and systemic oppression is more difficult to quantify but remain deeply entrenched in American society.

Conceptualizing Trauma and Trauma-Informed Work

Trauma has always been an unwelcome visitor on the sidelines of the human condition, waiting to methodically dismantle individuals, families, communities, and multiple generations. Derived from the Greek word for "wound" (Koenen et al., 2010), psychological and emotional trauma has adopted many faces and phases throughout the century, perhaps most notably during times of war (Crocq & Crocq, 2000). Manifestations of what we now know are symptoms of trauma were recorded by the Greek historian, Herodotus, during the battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. (Regel & Joseph, 2017). Centuries later, the conclusion of the Vietnam War garnered a heightened interest in the residual, debilitating impact of the psychological and emotional effects that persisted long beyond active combat (McFarlane, 2015). The term "shell shock" subsequently entered the lexicon (Crocq & Crocq, 2000).

In 1980, post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] was introduced and officially codified in the American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [DSM-III], and trauma research rapidly increased. It is important to note that trauma can profoundly impact individuals and communities, regardless of whether its manifestations align with all diagnostic criteria for PTSD. For example, the death of a family member or close friend due to natural causes no longer meets DSM-5 criteria for PTSD although it may produce debilitating symptoms of trauma (Pai & North, 2017). Arguably, the subjective interpretation of an experience or event as traumatic is more influential than diagnostic criteria regarding the impact of that experience or event on an individual (Marx et al., 2023).

Following the inclusion of PTSD in the DSM-III, it became clear that mental health institutions were not as supportive as they were intended to be, and were inadvertently perpetuating trauma due to the lack of trauma awareness, sensitivity, and system of care (Harris & Fallot, 2001). In the early 2000s, Dr. Roger Fallot and Dr. Maxine Harris (2001) introduced the paradigm shift of trauma-informed care which offered guidance to

individuals and organizations on how to better serve trauma-exposed individuals. Five core principles were incorporated into this model including safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment; all of which may be jeopardized during trauma exposure. Each component reinforces and is reinforced by the others (Hales et al., 2017). Drs. Fallot and Harris emphasized that these principles need to be implemented at all levels for an organization to truly be trauma informed.

In 2014, SAMHSA solicited input from trauma professionals, survivors, and experts, articulated the concept of trauma, and expanded Drs. Fallot & Harris's trauma-informed system of care model. SAMHSA's (2014) definition of trauma as "resulting from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (p. 7) remains as one of the most frequently referenced. Four Key Assumptions, known as the Four "Rs" were derived as essentials of trauma-awareness, including the **realization** of trauma and its effects, **recognition** of the signs of trauma, **responding** to an individual who has been traumatized, and **resisting** re-traumatization (p. 8-9). Culture, historical, and gender issues was added as the sixth principle of a trauma-informed approach along with the principles developed by Drs. Fallot and Harris.

Trauma-informed Pedagogy

Trauma-informed approaches have since graduated from the mental health sector and into various institutions such as education. In relevance to education, traumatic exposure can drastically affect multiple areas of the brain that are responsible for higher-level cognitive tasks such as learning, processing, storing, retaining, and accessing information (Bremner, 2006). Trauma may also surface in the classroom under the guise of frustrating, problematic behaviors which are then misattributed to other causes or erroneously assumed to be a product of willful choice (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2013). These misunderstandings can negatively affect interpersonal communication and social interaction, thereby reinforcing the feelings of shame, lack of self-worth, helplessness, hopelessness, and disempowerment that were endured during previous traumatic experience (NCTSN, 2013). Everyone in the classroom community could potentially be affected by these dynamics.

Trauma activation and ongoing hypervigilance threaten the oasis for growth and learning that every classroom should be. Educators are in a prime position of support on the path to resilience however, as educational institutions can serve as a consistent, accessible, and robust protective factor against trauma. While educators are not and should not be responsible for clinical interventions (Carello & Butler, 2014), being trauma-informed lends itself to intentionality in classroom design that minimizes the risk of re-traumatization or secondary trauma and enables learning (Carello, 2024).

Faculty Spotlight Introduction: Intentionality in Design and Practice

Dr. Herr-Perrin is an educator and former clinical social worker with expertise in trauma and mental health. She focuses on how to support students and higher education faculty through knowledge about trauma and trauma-informed teaching practices. Drs. Lewinski and McLaurin equip pre-service teachers with pedagogical knowledge and tools to enter the teaching workforce ready to empower students and their school communities. Together they are working across disciplines to spotlight the work of Drs. Lewinski and McLaurin with pre-service teachers.

Dr. McLaurin is an Assistant Professor with a focus on disability studies and trauma-informed pedagogy. Dr. Lewinski is an Associate Professor and the Director of the Graduate Program in Education. Her background is based in literacy instruction. Drs. Lewinski and McLaurin work at the same institution of higher education [IHE] and additionally with a local writing program for K-12 teachers. Their work in the community with local

educators and at their IHE which is grounded in trauma-informed practices.

Pedagogy that Works: The Design

Today's classrooms are complex and dynamic learning environments. Identifying the range of factors that positively impact student achievement has been a major focus of research. There is clear, documented evidence of the most effective features of practice including the degree of the teachers' influence and what they do to improve student learning outcomes (Allington 2002, Hattie 2009). Since trauma impacts everyone differently, it is impossible to create a blanket strategy for all. Therefore, it is imperative to design intentional activities that help each cohort of pre-service teachers to experience trauma-informed instruction as active learners and future creators.

Pedagogy that Works: Practical Applications

Next, we will provide an outline of how Drs. Lewinski and McLaurin implemented trauma-informed pedagogy into their classrooms. The authors will make a distinct connection between their work and the model of trauma-informed teaching and learning by Dr. Janice Carello (see Table 1 and Table 2) and Kolb's experiential learning theory. Carello (2022) emphasizes creating safe, reflective, and responsive learning environments that acknowledge students' lived experiences—including trauma. Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning supports this notion by arguing that learners process meaning through active engagement and critical reflection about their experiences. Carello's trauma-informed pedagogy aligns well with Kolb's focus on reflection and integration of experience as central to learning. Often the primary reference point for students is experiential knowledge. When a student actively experiences trauma-informed pedagogy it can help transform and solidify their own perspectives, including their views on teaching.

The following activities serve as a reference for educators who want to incorporate pedagogical practices that often exist as an "add on" or are attached to a separate theory. By integrating trauma-informed pedagogy into coursework that already exists, faculty can both model the value of and provide practical ways that pre-service teachers can transfer these concepts into their future classrooms. These activities invite reflection and generate a sense of belonging, critical thinking, and empowerment, all of which contribute to a transformative, trauma-informed educational experience.

Activity 1: Education Timeline Presentation: Exploring Educational Identity Through Personal Reflection

Objective: This activity encourages students to explore their educational histories, identify pivotal moments in their learning journeys, and engage in thoughtful reflection about how these experiences have shaped their views on education.

Background: Understanding our feelings and beliefs about education is a crucial step in shaping our perspectives as educators. Our personal histories and experiences with schooling play a significant role in how we perceive learning, teaching, and the overall education system. By reflecting on these experiences, we can develop greater self-awareness as learners and educators while gaining insight into how others may perceive education differently based on their own backgrounds.

This activity is designed to help students critically examine their educational journeys by creating a literacy timeline and reflecting on the key moments that have shaped their academic identities. The assignment encourages self-reflection and creates an authentic space for discussions about diverse experiences identity, equity, and personal growth within the education system. For example, many of the students of color shared about the first time they had a teacher that looked like them and described it as an impactful moment in their education. In these moments of vulnerability, educators should be mindful not to assign judgment to their experiences but rather to listen to and affirm the unique backgrounds of our pre-student teachers.

Table 1. Dr. Carello's Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning Model

Pillar	Definition
Safety	"Creating an environment that respects and accepts all individuals and helps them feel safe enough to take risks and learn from mistakes"
Trustworthiness and transparency	"Making expectations clear, ensuring consistency in practice, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and minimizing disappointment"
Support and connection	"Connecting with appropriate peers and professional resources to support academic, personal, and professional success."
Collaboration and mutuality	"Acting as allies rather than as adversaries and creating opportunities to share power and make decisions"
Empowerment, voice, and choice	"Building in opportunities to make choices, be heard, build skills, and develop confidence and competence."
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	"Striving to be aware of and responsive to issues of privilege and power and respecting one another's diverse experiences, perspectives, and identities."
Resilience, growth, and change	"Recognizing strengths and resilience and providing feedback to help each other grow and change."

(Carello. 2022)

*Table **2.** Integrating Dr. Carello's Model in Practice*

Pillar	Integration
Safety	• By encouraging personal reflection and discussion, the activity creates a space where students can share experiences without fear of judgment. • Educators are encouraged to affirm students' experiences rather than evaluate them, ensuring a supportive atmosphere. • A structured approach to sharing personal stories minimizes the risk of students feeling vulnerable or exposed. • The activity sets clear expectations about its purpose: self-reflection and understanding others' experiences. • Students are encouraged to share at their comfort level, reinforcing that their stories are respected and not assessed for correctness. • The instructor models trust by actively listening and validating student contributions.
Trustworthiness and transparency	• The activity sets clear expectations about its purpose: self-reflection and understanding others' experiences. • Students are encouraged to share at their comfort level, reinforcing that their stories are respected and not assessed for correctness. • The instructor models trust by actively listening and validating student contributions.
Support and connection	• The process of sharing personal literacy timelines allows students to see similarities and differences in their educational journeys, fostering empathy and connection. • Hearing diverse experiences helps students recognize that they are not alone in their struggles or triumphs. • Instructors provide support by acknowledging and affirming students' reflections.
Collaboration and mutuality	• The peer-sharing component promotes mutual learning, where students learn from one another's experiences. • The discussion format encourages active listening, reinforcing a classroom culture of respect and understanding. • By engaging in dialogue, students develop a deeper appreciation for the diverse perspectives in their learning community.
Empowerment, voice, and choice	• Students have autonomy in selecting which moments to highlight in their timeline and how to represent them.

	• Sharing their stories allows them to reclaim and articulate their educational experiences on their own terms. • The activity validates personal experiences and encourages students to reflect on how their past shapes their present views on education.
Diversity Equity and Inclusion	• By surfacing diverse perspectives, particularly from historically marginalized groups, the activity highlights systemic disparities in education. • Students can critically examine how factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and institutional policies have shaped their and their peers' schooling experiences. • Educators can use insights from this activity to promote more equitable classroom practices and policies.
Resilience, growth, and change	• Reflecting on past experiences helps students recognize their growth and resilience. • Discussions may prompt students to reconsider their educational journeys in a new light, fostering a mindset of learning and adaptation. • The activity encourages future educators to think about how they can create inclusive, supportive learning environments for their own students.

Instructions:

1. **Develop an Education Timeline:**
   a. Begin by reflecting on your schooling experiences and identifying key moments that influenced your development as a learner.
   b. Create a timeline that highlights significant persons, places, and events that shaped your literacy and educational journey.
   c. Consider both positive and negative experiences, as well as those that had a lasting impact on your academic identity.
2. **Create a Personal Showcase:**
   a. Using your timeline as a guide, develop a visual representation of your educational journey.
   b. Prepare 3-5 slides that include images, words, or symbols representing key moments from your schooling experiences.
   c. Your visuals should capture the emotions, challenges, and growth associated with each moment.
3. **Share Your Experience:**
   a. Present your personal showcase to the class in a five-minute presentation.
   b. Use this opportunity to share your reflections on what these experiences meant to you and how they have shaped your views on education.
4. **Write a Reflection:**
   a. After listening to your classmates' presentations, take time to reflect on both your own timeline and those of your peers.
   b. Consider the following guiding questions as you write your reflection (you do not need to answer all of them):
      i. How do you define education?
      ii. What do you think is the purpose of education?
      iii. Why have your experiences in school been positive and/or negative?
      iv. How do your schooling experiences compare to those of your classmates?
      v. Did you have any "aha" moments while listening to others' experiences?
      vi. How have your past experiences shaped your views on education today?

Adapting This Activity for Your Classroom.

This activity is flexible and can be adapted for various age groups and learning environments. In teacher preparation programs, it can serve as a reflective exercise to help future educators understand the diversity of student experiences. In K-12 classrooms, it can be modified to encourage students to explore their learning identities and build empathy for their peers' experiences. In a content rich course, this activity gives students the opportunity to reflect on how they feel about the content and where those feelings stem from.

In implementing this activity, educators should create an open and affirming space for students to share their stories. It is essential to approach these discussions with sensitivity, particularly when students reflect on difficult or marginalized experiences within the education system. Instead of evaluating or judging students' narratives, instructors should acknowledge and validate their perspectives. Simple affirmations such as, "Thank you for sharing" or "I appreciate your honesty" can promote a supportive classroom environment. Additionally, quoting students when providing feedback reinforces that their experiences are heard and valued.

> *I found the Education Timeline project to be the most focused on giving everyone a voice. This was my personal favorite of the assignments we've done. I was able to express how I felt about school and how it affected me, and I learned about how school affected other people in the class. While some people had great school experiences with close student-teacher connections and many friends, some people had poor experiences with school, involving bitter relationships with teachers and little connections with other students. Overall, I felt like the project helped me open myself up to my classmates.*

After doing this assignment, I felt more comfortable talking with people, which helped me have insightful group discussions.

Activity 2: Who's Telling the Story

Objective: The goal of this assignment is not to villainize an article or piece of scholarly work; however, the objective is to help students understand that information regarding a specific community or demographic can be shared from different perspectives. These perspectives can often shape how we interact and work with these different demographic groups.

Background: This activity demonstrates how educators can understand the history of culture and its impact on how students are viewed, which is a trauma-informed approach, while also identifying a source that is asset based versus deficit based. This is stated at the start of the lesson to build trustworthiness and transparency. In this example, African American youth in urban environments. The article is informative and contains historical context in a strength-based way, but it also holds vignettes that are written in a deficit-based approach. The focus is on what struggles African American youth have in urban environments. Contrast this to the video and one will notice that the presentation of information is strength based, highlighting what people from African American communities have done based on their skills and identification of need. Strengths based. This is in alignment with recommendations by Sherwood et al. (2021) that incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy with trauma-informed pedagogy. Additionally, this aligns with social justice and resilience, growth and change as outlined by in Carello's (2022) work.

When preparing pre-service teachers, it is imperative that the focus is on student assets and strengths versus their deficits. This practice will help educators be more culturally responsive and prepare them to work with students who have a vast range of abilities. An activity that presents similar content (e.g. African American youth in urban settings) with a different lens can introduce the concept resilience and support students in better understanding this competency.

Discussion Prompts:

1. How were the two pieces similar or different?
2. What are some observations you have from the Entrepreneur video
3. What are some observations from the article on Urban Youth?

By differentiating between resources that are asset-based vs. deficit-based pre-service teachers are learning how to view resources from different perspectives and with an anti-deficit mindset. Also, by recognizing the strengths in African American communities can counter stereotypical views that have aligned with generational oppression of African American communities. The assignment's impact is highlighted by this student's quote:

I notice that I truly find myself connecting with what is being shared. Especially the class where we spoke on trauma and watched the Pharell and Jay Z music video. It was comforting to see my culture being just as celebrated and validated as anyone else's. Yet, it also brought attention to the significance of being well informed on the different traumatic events we can experience in our lives and how to cope with them.

Community: Andre's Visit

When Drs. Lewinski and McLaurin designed their courses, they intentionally planned to have multiple sessions that combined their classrooms. In the beginning of the semester, activities were incorporated to build community amongst both classes. Andre, a hip-hop artist, poet, DJ, and community activist spoke during the final collaborative class. He highlighted his artwork and investment in the community as a mentor and writing coach for local—K-12 students. Andre elevated the students' voices by encouraging them to share their educational timelines (see Assignment 1) and receive feedback. During his visit, Andre partnered with the students through collaborating, actively listening, and sharing his own educational journey. He served as an ally and role-model of student empowerment which is integral to trauma-informed pedagogy.

I really appreciate this class because it really shows that it helps the community (youth). It also gives me the chance to participate in the community itself. I haven't

> *had many opportunities to play an active role in the community, so this is such a great opportunity. We talked about our school experiences and understood each other.*

Conclusion

This article outlines ways in which faculty can introduce transformational teaching in their respective classrooms through trauma-informed instruction. These faculty members incorporated state competencies for trauma-informed teaching into two practical assignments and lessons. We argue that it is more powerful to teach trauma-informed competencies through an innovative approach where students can experience authentic practices connected to the overarching framework while simultaneously learning about teacher education curriculum. The two should not be separated but interwoven to provide a comprehensive learning experience for pre-service teachers. Experiential knowledge enables learning to become more durable, and this experience will hopefully prompt students to be reflective, transformational, and trauma-informed educators.

The activities outlined in this manuscript did not come without challenges. There is an inherent power dynamic in the classroom that may silence students who disagree with the dominant opinion. The instructors note that they potentially missed students who were quiet or may have harbored different or challenging perspectives. However, activities like these may also lead to student growth as evidenced by the following quote:

> *Especially after the Education Timeline Presentations in class, I wanted to set goals and push myself more than I have ever done before. In high school, I was a big procrastinator and slacked off consistently throughout the year. An assignment that stood out to me was the Education Timeline Presentations because it encouraged me to be better as a student and inspired me to study harder than I was previously. Presently, I am more excited to study after classes and enjoy learning with my peers.*

The adaptation of trauma-informed teaching and learning pedagogy into higher education institutions is beneficial for all students as it acknowledges the prevalence and impact of trauma on learning, is student-centered and empowerment based, enables authenticity, encourages leaning into instead of away from vulnerability, and supports the emotional and psychological safety needed to unpack potentially heavy topics in the classroom. As a universal precaution, trauma-informed teaching and learning frameworks offer structure for educators with ample room for creativity.

Qualitative evidence, anecdotal reports, reflection, and conceptualization of trauma-informed educational practices are plentiful and generally positive in the literature, but more empirically based, systematic research is needed to truly assess their efficacy and develop consistent best practices. Establishing reliability and validity in studies can be extremely difficult as there are multiple ways to tailor trauma-informed pedagogy based on the unique needs and dynamics of each classroom. Aside from the principles of trauma-informed teaching and learning, no two blueprints will ever be exactly alike. We encourage educators to continue to collaborate with each other, analyze and consider modifying existing classroom activities, and perhaps most importantly, highlight and explore student perspectives about how trauma-informed teaching and learning pedagogy can guide their learning and future practice.

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Prior to her career in higher education, Ashley Herr-Perrin practiced clinical social work with adults, children, and families in a variety of in-home and community-based settings. She has served in various director and teaching roles in higher education for over a decade and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education and Social Work at La Salle University. Her experience in mental health and focus on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning have solidified her interest in trauma-informed educational practices in higher education and beyond. Dr. Herr-Perrin holds an Ed.D. in Higher Education Leadership from Wilmington University

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