



Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

We are living in incredibly turbulent times. A global pandemic, social unrest, a volatile presidential election, extreme environmental disasters, and radical changes in the way most of us live, work, and relax are events that have dramatically changed our lives. The physical, emotional, and mental toll on everyone is not only significant but unprecedented. For some, the changes have been inconvenient; for others, debilitating. College students have experienced a direct hit as a result of our current state of unrest (McMurtie, 2020; Zelecchoski, 2020). Our students are not the same students of February 2020. At a time in their lives when the college experience was supposed to be exciting, engaging, and a place to grow outside of the home, it has morphed into one of the most stressful times in a student's life. As a result, students are grieving over the loss of normalcy.

Success in college is difficult at best in “normal” times and beyond onerous in turbulent times. The feeling of isolation, lack of community, and a lack of feeling of belongingness is impeding our student's ability to succeed in their classes. We have all experienced trauma in some shape or form in our lives. Some of us more severe than others. Understanding that students have been traumatized by the changes in their lives and previous traumatic experiences is critical in order to help students succeed. It is this lived trauma that is not always recognized as a deterrent to the student's learning ability. Implementing teaching and learning strategies to enable student success is imperative (Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools [HEARTS], 2020).

Teaching Based on Six Trauma-Aware Principles

The [CDC's six principles to a trauma-informed approach](#) frame what we should consider when cultivating a work or learning environment mindful of the role trauma plays:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and Transparency
- Peer Support
- Collaboration and Mutuality
- Empowerment
- Cultural, Historical, & Gender Issues

Karen Costa, frequent speaker on trauma-aware teaching online and generally, created a [Trauma-Aware Teaching Checklist](#) for higher educators. As educators, we are obligated to understand our student population and the challenges they are experiencing that may hinder their success. Costa's teaching checklist touch on the many opportunities we as educators have to create an inclusive and safe classroom environment. Every effort to recognize how trauma affects learning that abate learning disparities must be employed to enable student success.

The valuable Trauma-Aware Teaching Checklist (Costa, 2020) has, in retrospect, influenced and supported my own teaching actions. Items on the checklist that resonate most profoundly in my courses include tips from all of the six principles. For example, on the first day of class I spend most of the time getting to know my students. I express how civility and respect defines our classroom and our relationships with each other. The class begins with recognition and appreciation of the student's **educational backgrounds**. I express my **respect** for their accomplishments and how the classroom is a place to learn from each other. Recognizing the value of **peer support** enhances the student's ability to identify themselves as **potential leaders** and create opportunities to build **peer connections**.

I embrace the students with warmth, kindness, a sense of belonging, to create a feeling of a **safe**, family-like environment. I express to the students how "it is all of us or none of us." We discuss **power**, or more correctly, the identification of the concept that I do not have power over them but rather, we have power together, power to grow, learn, and respect each other.

My strategies for creating a welcoming, **inclusive**, and safe classroom environment begins by mutually defining our classroom behavior philosophy and agreed upon civil classroom **behavioral norms**. After the classroom norms are established, each student states out loud a promise to be supportive of each other, beginning with my pledge to "be there" for them.

Creating a collaborative **classroom environment** is critical to the students' feeling of belonging and feeling of community. As a classroom family, we discuss **support for**

each other. As recommended by Costa (2020) I “recognize that minoritized individuals have immense intelligence, wisdom, strength, and creativity as both individuals and communities.” I share the **truth** about my own historical experiences, obstacles, and challenges as a first generation Mexican-American female college student. I also explain how I am not an expert on all **cultures** and will need their help to understand the multicultural classroom beliefs, especially when it comes to **assignments that may need to be modified** for cultural reasons. I ask the students to approach me if they need clarification on anything I say about culture that may not be in alignment with their belief as I do not intentionally want to offend anyone.

Moving forward, I plan to expand the use of the Trauma-Aware Teaching Checklist (Costa, 2020) and its framing principles (SAMHSA, 2014) in all of my classes.

References

Costa, K. (2020). [Trauma-Aware Teaching Checklist](http://www.100faculty.com). From her website <http://www.100faculty.com>

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Additional Resources

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