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Restorative Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Danielle Tumminio Hansen, *Seminary of the Southwest*

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The dual traumas of racial injustice and COVID-19 have caused academics to question many assumptions about how and why we teach. Faculty are reassessing their pedagogies, even as the need for transformative learning remains.

A trauma-informed, restorative pedagogy can help address the needs of our students and world.

Emerging from the wisdom of trauma theory and restorative justice, faculty may be able to enact practices that are more conducive to learning, create safe classroom environments, reduce hierarchy, and promote empathy during these difficult times if they understand how trauma works.

Understand Trauma

Understanding how trauma affects the brain is essential for trauma-informed pedagogy. Trauma occurs when individuals experience an event that threatens the self at a physical, psychological, or spiritual level. Posttraumatic stress may also result. Individuals experiencing

posttraumatic stress struggle with intrusive symptoms like flashbacks and numbing symptoms like attempting to avoid people and places that hearken to the trauma.

Given that the dual pandemics are ongoing, some individuals may be experiencing posttraumatic stress symptoms but others may not be in a “post” phase yet. Stuck in the midst of the trauma itself, students may have difficulty concentrating or engaging in decision-making and problem-solving. This occurs because trauma inhibits the prefrontal cortex as the brain relies more on those parts that control basic survival. This explains the “brain fog” many of us have experienced.

Trauma’s effect on the brain means that students may have trouble following directions or assignments. So it’s important for professors to state expectations clearly, repeatedly, and preferably through ways that engage multiple senses (i.e. making assignments and lectures available in both written and aural form).

Create Safety in the Classroom

Safety is the most fundamental step in trauma recovery. Without safety, it’s impossible to have the cognitive space to create meaning or the trust to reconnect with others. Trauma-informed pedagogy recognizes the need for classroom safety. Faculty can create physical safety by moving classes online to prevent viral spread or by following the best practices for in-person gatherings, which might require socially distanced desks, a classroom mask mandate, and directed traffic flow.

But physical safety is just the first step to creating a holistically safe pedagogical space. Psychological and spiritual safety are also needed.

To create psychological safety, professors can be transparent about how trauma impacts the teaching and learning process. It may be helpful to ask for student feedback at several points during the term and to do so with a genuine openness to recalibrating syllabi, class structure, and assignments. To create spiritual safety, faculty may want to begin with a meditation or silence and do the same after a break. Leaving space for reflection during classroom conversation can also feel spiritual grounding.

Reduce Hierarchy

Restorative pedagogies emerge from restorative justice practices, which categorize the court system as hierarchical and anti-relational. Lawyers engage in antagonistic speech with witnesses; judges issue rulings. Clients are largely silent. Conversation as we know it doesn’t exist. The classroom can function similarly when professors see themselves as having prized knowledge that they must transmit to intellectually deficient students. Professors’ voices thus receive privilege over student voices, creating a space that is hierarchical and, to some degree, unsafe.

To implement a pedagogically restorative space, professors may want to consider their own

power in the classroom and to engage in practices that flatten classroom hierarchy. Flipping the classroom, offering options for assignments, and doing the occasional circle process can help here. Faculty can also create more space for creativity in the classroom and in assignments to reduce the power given to the written and spoken word as privileged ways of knowing.

Promote Empathy

Brené Brown says that empathy is “feeling with people.” When we empathize with someone, we place ourselves in their situation and try to know something of their experience. Empathy can be a restorative pedagogical practice because of its capacity to humanize. Professors can promote empathy in the classroom by first creating a safe pedagogical environment, because it is impossible to take a step towards empathic vulnerability without safety. Professors can also create empathic learning environments by giving epistemic credibility to underrepresented groups, and by exposing students to ways of being that are different from their own.

A trauma-informed, restorative pedagogy has the capacity to enrich student learning because it emerges from the realities in which we live. By understanding how trauma works, creating safe classroom environments, reducing hierarchy, and promoting empathy, faculty can offer students a transformative opportunity to learn during a tender time.

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