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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: A Journey from Classroom to Community

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Blog Series: Embodied Teaching

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Trauma. Is there any more apt word for the past few years? COVID-19, social distancing, racialized violence, political insurrection—these are just a few of the collective traumas affecting our lives. I’m sure each of us can name additional layers from a personal standpoint, from broken relationships to untimely deaths. So, the need for trauma-informed pedagogical interventions in the classroom seemed uncontested and urgent when I wrote a small project grant proposal to the Wabash Center in spring 2021.

We knew our students were hurting. We were aware of individual trauma histories before social distancing shut down our in-person classrooms. Then COVID hit. Since mid-March 2020, significant portions of our online instruction were dedicated simply to checking in with students, connecting with them emotionally and spiritually, before engaging with them intellectually. Then, George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer in May 2020. Racialized violence hit our students and their communities hard; 35 percent of our student body is African American. We sought trauma-informed pedagogical strategies to help us.

The project, “Trauma-Informed Classroom Teaching at Lancaster Theological Seminary,” was

intended to equip our faculty with skills, tools, and strategies to optimize the classroom learning experience of students with existing and ongoing trauma histories. I learned that this is no small project. And neither is trauma-informed care reducible to tools and strategies—it involves our whole, embodied selves and the entire community.

We began by engaging a Trauma Informed Specialist to provide our faculty a conceptual introduction to trauma and trauma-informed care. This was an easy ask since Lancaster County is committed to becoming a trauma-informed community. In preparation for the workshop, the specialist, Melanie Snyder, invited the seminary to commit to becoming a trauma-informed organization through a program sponsored by her employer, Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health. It was not a good time for Lancaster Seminary to commit to this larger goal. Too much was in flux institutionally, including a combination with Moravian University, for us to look beyond our immediate classroom needs.

Snyder’s workshop, “Understanding Trauma, Resilience, and Trauma-Informed Care,” provided a robust introduction for our full-time faculty, some adjuncts, and a select few staff persons. The three hours flew by, equipping us with the basic vocabulary and concepts necessary to talk about trauma. My first inkling that this initiative would not remain confined to the classroom was when someone remarked how valuable the presentation was and asked why the entire staff had not been invited to participate. She was right. Trauma-informed care is a community-wide effort.

Our work on classroom pedagogy began in earnest with a workshop by Oluwatomisin (Tomi) Oredein of Brite Divinity School in October 2021. She taught a liberative approach to our individual preparations to create and implement one trauma-informed pedagogical strategy in our classroom during the academic year. We discussed how diverse experiences of race shape the trauma and resilience of individuals. We also examined how we bring our entire, embodied selves to the classroom as instructors, including our racial biases, experiences, and personal trauma histories. As one participant noted, “Trauma-informed pedagogy requires building relationships of trust with students, and to do this, I must be appropriately vulnerable.”

Acknowledging our own difficulties over the past two years was essential to this effort. Many faculty, as has been well-documented, were suffering their own traumas. As instructors, we had to grapple with “The Truth of These Matters”: we were worn down, some of us barely hanging on, and we had little bandwidth for innovating, improvising, and implementing new pedagogical strategies. A mid-year listening session with students informed the faculty of some of the struggles students were having and reminded us that we were all in it together. Again we learned that trauma impacts, and trauma-informed care requires, the work of the entire seminary community.

During the final workshop of our 18-month initiative, Stephanie Crumpton of McCormick Theological Seminary led us in a discussion of what we had accomplished, areas of growth, and next steps. Individual faculty members had succeeded, to greater or lesser degrees, in testing new trauma-informed pedagogical interventions in the classroom (informed by the resources

below). We understood we had a long way to go. Crumpton observed that our faculty had succeeded in become trauma-aware, the first step in becoming trauma-informed, and perhaps even becoming a place of healing centered engagement. The next steps would involve students, staff, and all members of our seminary. We are on a journey from classroom to community.

Select Resources on Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Crumpton, Stephanie M. "Trigger Warnings, Covenants of Presence, and More: Cultivating Safe Space for Theological Discussions About Sexual Trauma." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 20 (2017): 137-47.

Tinklenberg, Jessica L., ed. "Trauma-Informed Pedagogies in the Religious Studies Classroom." Special Issue, *AAR Religious Studies News, Spotlight on Teaching* (March 2021). <https://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/teaching/trauma-informed-pedagogies/editors-introduction>.

Wabash Center Blogs. "Teaching and Traumatic Events" series. (2018). <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/category/teaching-and-traumatic-events/>. (See especially posts by Lewis and McGarrah Sharp)

Wabash Center Blogs. "Teaching and Learning During Crisis" series. (2020). <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/category/teaching-and-learning-during-crisis/>. (See especially posts by Lee, Oredein, Rideau, and Silva-McCormick)

Wabash Center's Podcast Series: Dialogue on Teaching. "When Trauma Touches the Teaching Experience with Dr. Lisa Cataldo." (2021). <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/trauma-informedteaching/>

<https://wabash.center/2023/01/trauma-informed-pedagogy-a-journey-from-classroom-to-community/>