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Basic Course Forum

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: Promoting Inclusivity in The Basic Course

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Although faculty recognize the collective trauma students experienced during COVID-19, students were struggling with trauma well before the pandemic including acute (e.g., natural disasters, car accidents) and chronic (e.g., child abuse, homelessness) forms of trauma (NCTSN, 2006). Trauma is also personal and individualized (e.g. bullying, loss of friendships), and all of these examples have implications for how students learn. As students continue to navigate trauma and given that students from historically marginalized communities continue to experience systemic trauma (Hilse, 2022), it is important we explore how trauma-informed pedagogy in the basic communication course (BCC) can promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Trauma is conceptualized as any negative life event that occurs in a position of relative helplessness, in which the body bears the burden (Scaer, 2014). The physiological toll of trauma affects how people learn via the ability to process and make sense of new information (DePrince et al., 2009). Trauma often manifests through what instructors typically perceive as student misbehaviors including excessive absences, late assignments, social isolation, and/or classroom disruptions (Bell et al., 2013). Additionally, it is imperative to recognize that students from marginalized communities have been intentionally removed, denied, and isolated from economic, political, and cultural participation, and that this systemic trauma

impacts student learning. This recognition is inherent to the scholarship goals of critical communication pedagogy which acknowledges the power and systemic inequality that is (re)produced through communication of teaching and learning (Kahl, 2017; Fassett & Rudick, 2017); we argue this should also be at the heart of trauma-informed pedagogy. Despite instructors acknowledging their students enter the classroom with varied lived experiences including trauma, instructors often do not account for how trauma will impact student learning. As evidence, students who have experienced trauma typically earn lower grades, test lower on IQ measures, and are less likely to be retained (Bell et al., 2013).

We present this forum essay as perspective shift in which BCC instructors must “strive to understand how various forms of trauma may have impacted the lives of learners” (Zingarelli-Sweet, n.d.). Being that curriculum in the BCC often sets a foundation for students in their first year, it is a foundational course for many undergraduate students to graduate (Morreale et al., 2010), and there is an association between the BCC and student retention (McKenna-Buchanan et. al, 2020), it is essential BCC instructors incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy with a DEI lens. In what follows, we propose ideas of how to incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy in the BCC by promoting well-being, developing transparency, and fostering growth.

Promoting Well-being

It is important to create an environment in which students feel included and comfortable being vulnerable. Promoting well-being in the BCC may be as simple as asking students how they feel about an upcoming presentation. However, it is just as essential to recognize what is going on in the world around them (e.g. George Floyd, Roe v. Wade, War in Ukraine; Atay et al., 2021). Imad (2021) highlighted the importance of cultivating conversations and connections with students in and outside of the classroom. Instructors should also share their own experiences with students as it can be a powerful reminder of our collective humanity. However, this does not suggest that instructors should enact the role of a counselor—especially given many instructors feel unqualified due to a lack of mental health-related training and licensing (White & LaBelle, 2019). Thus, the distinction is that instructors provide space to acknowledge the presence of trauma that may be hindering student learning with a focus on student well-being.

Evidence suggests both teachers and students benefit from trauma-informed pedagogy (Brunzell et al., 2019). BCC instructors can promote well-being by recognizing signs of student trauma based on classroom behavior (Bell et al., 2013),

empathically listening to students when they disclose their traumatic experiences, referring students to resources that would help them cope (White & LaBelle, 2019), offering leniency and extensions for assignment submissions when appropriate, and engaging in proactive strategies such as developing transparency.

Developing Transparency

It is necessary to develop a clear and simple structure that helps students predict and navigate uncertainty in the BCC. Imad (2021) shared that “when we are under the influence of traumatic stress, we can quickly feel overwhelmed by (too much) information” (p. 10). To help develop transparency it is imperative BCC instructors outline clear expectations that promote inclusivity while also providing a roadmap of the course that minimizes ambiguity. This promotes consistency and reduces the burden for both instructors and students (Tatum & Broeckelman-Post, 2022). When students know what to expect each week, despite experiencing traumatic stress, they are able to better manage classroom expectations. With this in mind, it is important that BCC instructors make the content accessible to students through scaffolding or sequencing. Additionally, when students recognize how concepts are connected, they are more likely to feel comfortable with the content. This also makes the content feel less overwhelming for students from marginalized communities who may have been intentionally isolated from certain conversations. BCC instructors should also review and preview content and invite questions at the start of each session. This transparency is trauma-informed by helping everyone in the class begin to focus, no matter what lived experience they may be bringing in.

Fostering Growth

It is beneficial for BCC instructors to focus on student growth. Students who have navigated trauma often have a negative sense of self (Harper & Neubauer, 2021). In developing trauma-informed pedagogy it is important that BCC instructors help students improve their confidence through improved communication competence and goal development. Instructors should revisit goals throughout the semester to help students develop a growth mindset—which is related to improved communication competence, higher speech grades in the BCC, and lower scores on public speaking apprehension measures (Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019). Additionally, if the BCC is truly teaching students how to be effective communicators, then instructors must encourage students to participate in classroom decisions (e.g, deadlines, presentation order) especially in spaces where students from

marginalized communities have been denied or isolated. Empowering students provides them space to grow in confidence and be included as part of a larger community. Although not all students will easily make progress, this perspective reinforces a commitment to building an equitable learning environment.

Conclusion

On the whole, the BCC should incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy, and in doing so, this will promote DEI efforts through the acknowledgment of systemic trauma experienced by students from historically excluded populations. BCC instructors need to acknowledge the burden students bring to the BCC as the curriculum is a foundational first year course. In enacting these practices in the BCC, instructors are able to shift their approach to be more trauma-informed which ultimately promotes DEI.

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