

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Teaching on conflict and violence demands an awareness and sensitivity to the emotional reactions people may have, and I aim to incorporate trauma-informed practices in my teaching. While I have attending trainings on incorporating Community Resilience Model (CRM) on trauma-informed practice into the classroom, I find that somatic practices are best recommended as practices outside of class rather than practiced directly in the classroom. I model my pedagogy on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) trauma-informed care framework.

First, I always aim to flag topics that I am aware are sensitive to my students, and I tell them that they have full ability to miss class or request alternative readings for those days. While some students did miss classes on days that covered particularly sensitive topics, none took gratuitous advantage of that policy. My attendance was surprisingly high throughout the course, and the students' participation in class conversation was thoughtful, informed, and mature. My teaching evaluations reflect this high attendance despite it's lack of requirement; out of the 40 students who submitted evaluations, 30 students (55% of the total class) attended lectures over 90% of the time, and 22 students (40% of the total class) attended lectures between 95-100% of the time.

Second, I aim to ensure that the classroom remains a neutral and safe space where students feel as if their lived experiences are validated and their opinions are able to update given new information. My preferred teaching style is to engage with students throughout the lecture, either through open questions, activities, or debates. When asking my students questions, I often seek to hear their personal experiences. I never "cold-call" on students to force them to share—rather, I ask students low-stakes "fun" questions early on in the course and the lectures to implicitly teach students that there are not negative consequences for saying the "wrong" thing. Additionally, the weekly journal assignments often provide students with outlets to share their personal experiences without feeling judged by their classmates. When engaging in debates, I do not allow students to choose which side they are on; they may have to defend an opinion that is different from their own. I believe that this encourages students to engage in the debate process without feeling like they will be attacked; they are defending an idea, not themselves. This posturing increases students' trust in their fellow classmates and re-affirms their safety in the classroom.

The timing of my Nationalism and Violence course exponentially increased the weight of the content. Many significant and unforeseen violent events occurred through the duration of the course, which led to sensitive and emotionally-charged conversations across the country and university. The most emotionally difficult incident for me was holding class the day after the shooting of Charlie Kirk on the Utah Valley University campus. This event took the entire nation by shock and resulted in a widely spread and graphic video of the killing; my students, with their omnipresence on social media, were among those who saw the horrific video and the national reaction first. Some of my students told me that they were fearful to attend class, either fearing copycat attacks or violent retribution towards the assumed political background of the perpetrator.

When I addressed these events at the beginning of class, I highlighted the collective traumatization of these events and pushed for students to seek help from mental health professionals and to work on grounding themselves. their nervous systems by connecting with loved ones, spending time in nature, and avoiding social media. I carefully monitored conversations in class to ensure that nothing was said out of fear, anger, or hatred so that the classroom remained a space of respect and honesty. Throughout every class following, I reminded students of their shared humanity of each other and the dignity that every human being should be afforded.

I know my students felt that the space remained safe and respectful. In one of my student's weekly reflections, they wrote, "I appreciated the way our teacher approached the incident, giving us the space to pause rather than forcing a conversation at a difficult time. [...The events of this week] all underline for me how nationalism and political extremity are shaping, and in many ways destabilizing, our civilization." When teaching emotionally distressing or difficult topics, it is crucial for me to allow students to think and feel without feeling pressure to jump to a conclusion or a belief. When appropriate, it is beneficial to allow space for students to talk about their experiences. Having a trauma-informed practices baked into the structure of my class and my teaching strategies allows students the space to react personally, evaluate their reaction, and feel safe to explore those feelings and beliefs.