

Creating Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning Environments: Self-Assessment Questions for Educators

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Principle 1: Physical, Emotional, Social, and Academic Safety

Key Question: To what extent does the learning environment ensure the physical, emotional, social, and academic safety of students, including feeling safe to make and learn from mistakes?

Classroom Specific Questions:

- How would you describe the physical and/or digital learning environment? Is it comfortable and inviting?
- What authority style do you model: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, or uninvolved?
- Do you communicate using assertive, nonviolent communication methods?
- Are you attentive to signs of student distress? Do you understand these signs in a trauma-informed way?
- How do you manage conflict during group discussions, activities, and assignments?
- Are students provided low stakes opportunities to make and learn from mistakes prior to being evaluated?

Principle 2: Trustworthiness and Transparency

Key Question: To what extent do learning policies and practices maximize trustworthiness and transparency by making expectations clear, ensuring consistency in practice, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and minimizing disappointment?

Classroom Specific Questions:

- Does the syllabus or learning contract provide clear information about what will be done, by whom, by when, under what circumstances, at what cost, and for what purpose?
- Are there any pulls toward less professional contacts in this setting?
- How do you handle dilemmas between role clarity and accomplishing multiple tasks (e.g., navigating working on a research project with a student or serving as both advisor and course instructor)?
- How do you communicate expectations regarding the completion, submission, and evaluation of assignments? Are expectations reasonable? Is unnecessary disappointment avoided?
- Is there any type of informed consent process? Do students have any opportunity to negotiate an alternative assignment to if they believe a specific activity or assignment would put them at risk?

Principle 3: Support and Connection

Key Question: To what extent are students linked with appropriate peer and professional resources to help them succeed academically, personally, and professionally?

Classroom Specific Questions:

- Do you post or have on hand referral information for campus and community resources such as counseling, health, and tutoring services or providers?
- Are you available to provide support during office hours, before/after class, or through some other means?
- Do you facilitate peer activities that help students connect with their peers and provide mutual support?

Principle 4: Collaboration and Mutuality

Key Question: To what extent do educators and students share common goals and share power?

Classroom Specific Questions:

- Do you and your students perceive each other as allies or as adversaries?
- Do students understand their role and its importance?
- Is student accountability or impairment handled in a way that conveys “What’s happened to the student?” versus “What’s wrong with the student?”
- What role do students have in planning and evaluating their course experiences?
- Are student learning preferences and needs given substantial weight?
- Do learning experiences cultivate a model of doing “with” rather than “to” or “for” students?

Principle 5: Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Key Question: To what extent are students viewed as experts of their own experiences and learning and as such are empowered to make choices and develop confidence and skills?

Classroom Specific Questions:

- How much choice does each student have over the content they engage with or how they engage with it?
- How much choice does each student have over the activities and assignments they complete?
- To what extent are the student's priorities given weight in terms of learning objectives?
- Do students get clear, consistent, and appropriate messages about their rights and responsibilities?
- Do you communicate a conviction that the student is the ultimate expert on their experience and learning?
- Do you communicate that learning environment is one over which students have little control?
- Are there negative consequences for exercising particular choices? Are these necessary or arbitrary?

Principle 6: Social Justice

Key Question: To what extent are policies and practices responsive to issues of privilege and oppression and respectful of diverse individual and collective experiences and identities?

Classroom Specific Questions:

- In what ways do you address stereotypes and biases in the learning environment (e.g. using correct pronouns, addressing microaggressions)? Which stereotypes and biases are addressed?
- In what ways are policies and practices responsive to and respectful of students' diverse experiences and identities (e.g. using progressive stacking during discussion, employing alternative grading methods)? To which experiences and identities are they responsive?
- To what extent are you aware of personal and disciplinary biases and how they may impact teaching and learning (e.g. privileging or disparaging particular dialects, writing styles, or research methods)?
- Are efforts made to ensure course materials and activities are accessible?

Principle 7: Resilience, Growth, and Change

Key Question: To what extent do policies and practices recognize and facilitate student resilience, growth, and change?

Classroom Specific Questions:

- How are each student's strengths and resilience recognized?
- Do you communicate a sense of realistic optimism about the capacity of students to reach their goals?
- Do learning and feedback emphasize student growth more than student deficits?
- How are students helped to understand and reflect upon their own and others' growth and change processes?

(Adapted from [Fallot & Harris, 2009](#); [SAMHSA, 2014](#))

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