Trauma Informed Teaching & Learning in Times of Crisis

Presented by
Janice Carello, PhD, LMSW
April 2020
Questions to be addressed:

1. What does it mean to be *trauma-informed* (TI)?
2. Why does being TI matter to college educators, especially during times of crisis?
3. What does TI college teaching look like?
4. What can you do right now to be more TI?
5. What can you do moving forward to be more TI?
6. Where can one find additional resources for becoming a more TI college educator?
7. What are you already doing that’s TI?
What does it mean to be trauma-informed (TI)?
Origins of TI approaches
To be TI in any context means

a) to **understand** the ways in which violence, victimization, and other forms of trauma can impact individuals, families, and communities and

b) to **use that understanding** to inform policies and practices in order to prevent (re)traumatization and promote resilience and growth

(adapted from Butler, Critelli, & Rinfrette, 2011; Harris & Fallot, 2001)
Trauma

Upset or Distress
“Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning.”

-Herman, 1997, *Trauma and Recovery*
Smyth and Greyber (2013) observe that “woven into each definition is the concept of an event combined with an individual’s perception of and reaction to an event” (p. 26).
Trauma types

I: Acute Trauma/PTSD
• Short-term, unexpected event
• Examples: one time rape, car accident, natural disaster

II: Individual Identity/Complex Trauma
• Sustained, repeated ordeal stressors
• Examples: ongoing abuse, combat, domestic violence, prostitution, captivity, torture

III: Collective Identity Trauma/Continuous Traumatic Stress
• Ongoing systemic and/or cultural oppression
• Examples: discrimination, racism, sexism

(Kira et al, 2013; SAMHSA, 2014)
Definitions of retraumatization

▪ In the literal sense, retraumatization refers to traumatic stress reactions or symptoms that develop after multiple exposures to events that are perceived as traumatic (Duckworth & Follette, 2012)

▪ Retraumatization also refers to the triggering or reactivation of traumatic stress reactions or symptoms in response to a situation that mirrors prior experience or relationship dynamics (SAMHSA, 2014a)
To experience (re)traumatization is also to

▪ Feel terror, confusion, and betrayal
▪ Experience physical and/or psychological violation
▪ Be subject to another’s rage, neglect, and/or cruelty
▪ Feel powerless, helpless, damaged
▪ Lack agency or control
▪ Exposures or relationship dynamics that recapitulate these experiences can also be retraumatizing

(Adapted from Butler, Critelli, Rinfrette, 2011)
Why does TI teaching matter, especially during times of crisis?

but why?
Trauma Prevalence Rates

It’s *always* a potential time of crisis
College student trauma histories

- Percent of college students reporting lifetime exposure to one or more traumatic events?
  - 66% - 94%

- Most common events?
  - Life-threatening illness
  - Unexpected death of a loved one

- Percent meeting criteria for PTSD?
  - 9% - 12%
  - Many more may suffer subsyndromal symptoms

(Bernat et al., 1998; Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011; Smyth et al., 2008)
College educator trauma histories?

- Percent of college educators with a trauma history?
  - ???

- An estimated 70% of adults in the US have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lives

- Up to 20% develop PTSD

(Sidran Institute, 2016)
(Re)traumatization rates?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Role (n)</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer Not to Say (3)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD Students (12)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW Students (103)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Educators (49)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty (14)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff (5)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (186)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Carello, 2018)
Risks of trauma exposure

▪ **Indirect trauma exposure** (e.g. listening to trauma narratives) increases risk of **secondary traumatic stress, burnout, & retraumatization**

▪ **Direct trauma exposure** increases risk of:
  - PTSD
  - Adjustment problems
  - Depression
  - Lower GPA
  - Substance use
  - Drop-out

(Bride, 2007; DeBerard et al., 2004; Duncan, 2000)
More than content is (re)traumatizing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences Within Program</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy/Policy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Work</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video/Lecture/Readings</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Discussion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field/GA Supervision</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Death</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experiences Outside Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences Outside Program</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death/ Illness of Loved One</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault/Injury/Bullying</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Client Death</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Carello, 2018)
(Re)traumatization is often about conflict between educators & students

▪ Threatening
▪ Abusive
▪ Oppressive
▪ Neglectful
▪ Abandoning
▪ Unfair or disproportionate punishment

(Carello, 2018)
Learning & recovery are about connection between educators & students

“When this event happened I asked for an extension from two of my professors. One of them said absolutely, no problem. The other professor I had addressed how I was, if I was receiving services, reported the incident and asked that I receive follow up from [school] services. The last thing she addressed was that I could have an extension for longer than I asked for, and told me to call her if I needed further assistance. That meant a lot more to me than I could have guessed it would.”

(Carello, 2018)
The impact of trauma on learning and behavior

**Survival Mode: Flight/Fight/Freeze**

- Frontal lobe (Prefrontal cortex) goes offline
- Limbic system / mind and lower brain functions take over

![Brain diagram](image)
# Neurobiological impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part of Brain</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amygdala (becomes over-reactive)</td>
<td>Management of emotions</td>
<td>Emotional dysregulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hippocampus (shrinks)</td>
<td>Memory and memory consolidation</td>
<td>Impaired memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broca (gets smaller and deactivated)</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Shuts down speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefrontal Cortex</td>
<td>Executive functioning</td>
<td>Impaired thinking, judgment, and processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortisol (gets over-produced)</td>
<td>Hormone (chemical secreted by an endocrine gland)</td>
<td>Triggers amygdala resulting in fight, flight, freeze responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norepinephrine (gets released)</td>
<td>Neurochemical (chemical released from a nerve cell)</td>
<td>Hypervigilence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Groner et al., n.d.)*
Impact on emotion regulation

The Bi-Phasic Response to Trauma

Figure 2

(Arousal)

(Re)traumatized

Hyperarousal

Optimum Arousal Zone & Learning

Freezing/Numbing

(Fight or Flight)

(Re)traumatized

Regulated

Stay & Play

Freeze or Appease

Adapted from Schupp (2004)
What does TI college teaching look like?
TI approaches in higher education

To be trauma-informed in the context of higher education means

a) to understand the ways in which violence, victimization, and other forms of trauma can impact students, teachers, and staff

and

b) to use that understanding to inform educational policies and practices in order to minimize the possibilities for (re)traumatization and maximize the possibilities for learning and growth

(adapted from Butler, Critelli, & Rinfrette, 2011; Carello & Butler, 2014, 2015; Harris & Fallot, 2001)
Being TI means shifting our focus

Individual

- What is wrong with you?

Trauma as disorder

Individual in Environment

- What has happened to you?

Trauma as injury or disability

(Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008; Harris & Fallot, 2001)
Being TI means making learning accessible & helping to re-establish a sense of control, connection, & meaning.
Being TI is congruent with UD & SCL

Universal Design

“Disability in and of itself is not a problem, but the environment in which we ask people with disabilities to function often is.”

(Harrison, 2006, p. 152)
Being TI means changing our environment

“Trauma-informed care is conceptualized as an organizational change process centered on principles intended to promote healing and reduce the risk of retraumatization for vulnerable individuals.”

(Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p. 223; SAMHSA, 2014)
# Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning Principles

Janice Carello, PhD, LMSW  
[https://traumainformedteaching.blog/resources/](https://traumainformedteaching.blog/resources/)

| Physical, Emotional, Social, & Academic Safety | Efforts are made to create an atmosphere that is respectful of the need for safety, respect, and acceptance for all class members in both individual and group interactions, including feeling safe to make and learn from mistakes. |
| Trustworthiness & Transparency | Trust and transparency are enhanced by making course expectations clear, ensuring consistency in practice, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and minimizing disappointment. |
| Support & Connection | All class members are connected with appropriate peer and professional resources to help them succeed academically, personally, and professionally. |
| Collaboration & Mutuality | All class members act as allies rather than as adversaries to help ensure one another’s success. Opportunities exist for all class members to provide input, share power, and make decisions. |
| Empowerment, Voice, & Choice | All class members emphasize strengths and resilience over deficiencies and pathology; they empower one another to make choices and to develop confidence and competence. |
| Social Justice | All class members strive to be aware of and responsive to forms of privilege and oppression and to respect one another’s diverse experiences and identities. |
| Resilience, Growth, & Change | All class members recognize each other’s strengths and resilience, and they provide feedback to help each other grow and change. |

(Principles adapted from [Fallot & Harris, 2009](#); [SAMHSA, 2014](#))  
Updated March 2020
The scope of TI approaches in Higher Education

- TITL: classroom & field settings
- TIPD: departments & programs
- TICU: colleges & universities
Trauma-Informed ≠ Trauma Specific

**Trauma-Informed**

Understanding the effects of trauma on educators & students and practicing methods that promote resilience & prevent further harm.

**Trauma-Specific**

Treating specific symptoms or syndromes related to traumatic experiences.
TITL DOES NOT mean

- Avoiding teaching or learning about trauma or other sensitive or difficult topics
- Students will never experience upset, distress, or retraumatization
- Acting as students’ therapist
- Lowering standards of excellence
- All students will be able to successfully complete courses
Balancing Act

“Trauma confronts schools with a serious dilemma: how to balance their primary mission of education with the reality that many students need help in dealing with traumatic stress to attend regularly and engage in the learning process.”

“The major challenge to educators working with highly stressed or traumatized adults is to furnish the structure, predictability, and sense of safety that can help them begin to feel safe enough to learn.”

(Ko et al, 2008, p. 398)  
(Perry, 2006, p. 25)
What can you do right now to be more TI?
Self-Care Essentials

- Sleep.
- Exercise.
- Set healthy boundaries, including reasonable work hours.
- Take off your superhero cape. It’s not all on you. Let others help.
- Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.
- Take breaks, even when you don’t feel you need or have time for them.
Addressing signs of STS, VT, RT, or BO

- Persistent or excessive anger, guilt, or helplessness in relation to students’ past or current suffering
- Preoccupation with one or more students
- Excessive interest or fascination with details of student suffering
- Rescue fantasies
- Negatively generalizing students or student behavior
- Symptoms such as headaches, sleeplessness, intrusive imagery, emotional numbing, difficulty trusting others
- Feeling like nothing you do makes a difference

(adapted from Neumann & Gamble, 1995)
Validate & De-escalate

Avoid using scolding, sarcastic, or defensive language that may trigger students’ and colleague’s emotional defenses. When this happens, people put energy into protecting themselves and conflicts can escalate.

Transfer Credit

I can certainly understand your wanting to reduce the number of courses you need to take if possible. I have looked at your transcripts and cannot find any courses or combinations of courses that would be considered equivalent to 601. Also, the only courses that come close were taken more than 5 years ago and are courses in which you earned less than a B grade. We also do not give credit for experience.

I know this is not what you were hoping to hear. I am sorry that I am unable to grant your request. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Schedule Changes

I can certainly understand your frustration. Even when we know why changes are made, it can still feel disappointing. As a department, we continue to work to improve policies and procedures to minimize disappointment, and your feedback helps with that. So thank you for sharing your concerns.

Let me know if you’d like to chat more about this issue or if I can be of further assistance.
Help-Seeking Resources

▪ **211:** Call 211 to get referrals for local community services or visit the [211 website](https://211.org) for more info.

▪ **Therapist Finder:** Psychology Today hosts a [therapy finder database](https://www.psychologytoday.com/therapist-finder) where you can find detailed listings of mental health professionals in your area.

▪ **Crisis:** The [National Hope Line](https://www.nationalhopeline.org) provides free 24/7 confidential crisis support in the US: call or text 1-877-235-4525. The [Crisis Text Line](https://www.crisistextline.org) provides free 24/7 crisis support in the US: text HOME to 741741.
20 Tips and Reminders for Teaching Online during Times of Crisis

These reminders and tips are meant to help reduce both instructors’ and students’ stress. These strategies should also help instructors save time and reduce conflict with students.
1. Keep communications brief. Students are also being inundated with information.

2. If you are not already posting weekly announcements and/or module overviews or summaries, now may be a good time to start. This can help cut down on the number of emails sent, create a routine, provide clarification, and foster a sense of connection.

3. Reassure students you are there and you care by responding within 48 hours or less to all emails and to all questions they post in “Ask the professor” types of discussion forums.

4. Make sure all due dates for the rest of the semester are clear.

5. Try to limit the number of course changes.
6. Post all changes in writing.

7. Strive to keep your courses well-organized. Students who can easily locate course materials and assignments will panic less and contact you less frequently about missing or hard-to-find items.

8. Avoid surprises. Now is not a good time to add a new requirement to a module that has already been opened or a new assignment that was not previously listed in the syllabus.

9. Consider making all remaining course modules available so students can work ahead if needed. This may also help reduce the need for incompletes.

10. Limit feedback on assignments by speaking only to the most important parts of an assignment. This will help you grade assignments in a timely manner and help students focus their learning. If everything is important, nothing is important.
11. Consider reducing or eliminating late penalties so you can encourage students to meet deadlines but avoid unfairly punishing those who are unable to do so because of circumstances beyond their control.

12. Consider reducing the workload for students and for yourself, if you are able to do so without compromising the course objectives. The quality of learning may increase if the quantity of assignments decreases.

13. Consider offering live office hours using a video conferencing platform such as Zoom or Hangouts, if you are not already doing so.

14. Provide students with a phone number at which they can leave you a message and call-back number in the event they lose access to the internet.

15. Reach out to students who start to fall behind. Call to check on students who go missing.
16. Continue to hold high expectations and convey confidence that students will meet their learning goals.

17. Remind yourself and students to not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

18. Practice what you teach with regard to self-care.

19. Pay attention to what’s working well.

20. You’ve got this.

Carello (2020):
https://traumainformedteaching.blog/2020/03/19/20-tips-and-reminders-for-teaching-online-during-times-of-crisis/
What can you do moving forward to be more TI?
Regular check-ins

Complete ONE of the following sentence starters about your experiences in the course so far:

▪ I’ve learned...
▪ I was surprised...
▪ I hope...
▪ I liked...
▪ I would like...
▪ I’m still confused about...
▪ I’m feeling...
▪ I...
Online check-In tips

- Refer to students by name when responding
- Make it easy for students to locate feedback
- Customize (e.g. ask questions about assignment progress, midterm grades, etc.)
- Validate
- Convey optimism
- Encourage help-seeking
Teaching policies & practices that emphasize a growth mindset
If you receive a grade lower than B on any assignment worth 5 points or more, you may revise and resubmit it for regrading. No other assignments may be revised and resubmitted. In order for the assignment to be regraded, I need you to submit a document in which you have tracked all of the changes or provided a detailed list of all of the changes with page and paragraph numbers where they can be located. Revised and resubmitted work will be graded as late.
Late days policies

Each student has a total of 5 late days that may be used on assignments worth 5 or more points without any consequence to the assignment grade. To use late days: notify me by email at least 30 minutes before the assignment is due. Late days start immediately after the due date and run for 24 hours. If more than 5 late days are accumulated, or if you do not notify me in advance, the assignment will be graded as late.
Late work policies

Late assignments cannot earn a grade higher than B.
Dropping a few low grades

Grading/Rubric: You will have the opportunity to participate in 13 forums. The 3 lowest forum grades will be dropped. I will grade each forum using the rubric below. I will also provide individual forum feedback in the gradebook and group feedback in the following week’s module video. Late forum posts will be accepted but cannot earn full credit.
Constructive feedback

▪ Tell students what was done effectively
▪ Talk specifically to the assignment—what was or was not addressed
▪ Ask questions
▪ Emphasize learning over rule obedience
▪ Speak in terms they understand
▪ Employ a positive, encouraging tone
▪ Emphasize strengths (i.e. what’s improving vs. what’s wrong)
▪ Replace phrases such as “You should” or “You need” with “I would like to see…” or “Remember to…”
Student self-evaluation

- **Grading/Rubric**: Copy/paste the rubric below on a separate page at the end of each part of your paper and use the highlighting feature to indicate how you would rate yourself. On the same page, also answer the following:

  - What did you do well in this part of the assignment?
  - With what are you still struggling?
  - What is one specific thing you’d like feedback on from me about this part of the assignment?
  - What else, if anything, would you like me to know about this part of the paper or your process writing it?
Where can one find additional resources for becoming a more TI college educator?
20 Tips and Reminders for Teaching Online during Times of Crisis

The reminders and tips below are meant to help reduce both instructors' and students' stress. These strategies should also help instructors save time and reduce conflict with students. I encourage you to share your tips and reminders in the comments. Be well.

1. Keep communications brief. Students are also being inundated with information.
2. If you are not already posting weekly announcements and/or module overviews or summaries, now may be a good time to start. This can help cut down on the number of emails sent, create a routine, provide clarification, and foster a sense of connection.
3. Reassure students you are there and you care by responding within 48 hours or less to all emails and to all questions they post in "Ask the professor" types of discussion forums.
4. Make sure all due dates for the rest of the semester are clear.
5. Try to limit the number of course changes.
6. Post all changes in writing.
7. Strive to keep your courses well-organized. Students who can easily locate course materials and assignments will panic less and contact you less frequently about.
Self-Care

▪ Self-Care Starter Kit:
  ▪ http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit.html

▪ Self-Care for Educators:
Psychological First Aid


▪ Psychological First Aid Listen, Protect, Connect (PFA-LPC):

▪ https://traumaawareschools.org/pfa
Course Design & Web Accessibility

▪ Quality Matters Rubric:
  https://www.qualitymatters.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/StandardsfromtheQMHigherEducationRubric.pdf

▪ Web Accessibility Guidelines:
Books

- Bandwidth Recovery by Cia Verschelden
- Trauma and Human Rights by Butler, Critelli, Carello
- Mindset by Carol Dweck
- Nonviolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg
- I Hear You by Michael S. Sorensen
- Discipline with Dignity by Curwin, Mendler, & Mendler
- Attachment Theory and the Teacher-Student Relationship by Philip Riley
K-12 and other resources

- Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative: https://traumasensitiveschools.org/
- ACEs Connection Network: https://www.acesconnection.com/
- ACEs in Higher Education: https://www.acesconnection.com/g/aces-in-higher-education
What are you already doing that’s TI?
Questions?
References


