

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

TEACHING

What Does Trauma-Informed Teaching Look Like?

By *Beth McMurtrie* | JUNE 04, 2020

You're reading the latest issue of Teaching, a weekly newsletter from a team of Chronicle *journalists*. [Sign up here](#) to get it in your inbox on Thursdays.

This week:

- I share experts' advice on how to mitigate learning challenges brought on by stress.
- I point you to further resources on trauma-informed teaching.
- I share reader-recommended books on how to teach online.
- I remind you about two coming virtual events.

An Explainer on Trauma-Informed Teaching

While I was reporting my latest story about a possible return to campus this fall, I spoke to a number of teaching experts about what to anticipate when students and instructors gather, masked and distanced, in classrooms.

If you thought going to the grocery store was stressful, picture spending two hours in a room with other people, trying to give a lecture or have a conversation. Aside from the logistics of being able to hear someone talk through a mask -- or plexiglass -- imagine how tense everyone will get if a student coughs. And what about all of the other challenges the people in that room face each day, as they wend their way across campus, worried that they might be exposing themselves to a dangerous virus?

Add to that the political, social and economic turmoil of recent weeks and months, and what it has done to students' finances, health, and sense of safety, and you've got a stressed-out classroom.

Stress inhibits learning. So what can professors do to help students under these conditions? As I noted in my story, they shouldn't act as therapists or counselors. But rather, say teaching experts, they must recognize and adjust to this unique situation.

“If we prepare, we can manage,” says Mays Imad, a professor of genetics, biotechnology, and bioethics at Pima Community College, who has trained others on the topic, both students and instructors. “If I walk around stressed out and on autopilot, that’s a disaster. But if I have that awareness, I can at least regulate how I respond.”

Trauma can affect students’ executive functioning and self-regulation skills. That means they will have a harder time planning, remembering, and focusing on what they need to learn. To compensate, Imad and other teaching experts suggest the following:

Don't go it alone. Work with one or two other instructors on your campus, or with your teaching and learning center staff members, to help devise strategies for your classrooms. This network will give you both a sounding board for your ideas and a support group to help manage your own stress during this time.

Re-examine your course. Ask yourself, what are the core things you want students to learn? Have realistic expectations for this semester. Simplify your syllabus. If students are normally expected to write three term papers, will you compromise the integrity of the course if you ask them to do only two? Or, instead of assigning a lengthy paper, which may be harder than usual for many students to complete, can you ask them to produce a video or a podcast? Also, ask yourself if you can exchange a few high-stakes tests for more-frequent lower-stakes quizzes and other assessments.

Be organized but flexible. Structure your course, and your goals, as clearly as possible, so students understand where you’re headed and how you plan to get there, week by week. But also be flexible, should challenges arise. If students get sick or stressed, they may miss class or turn in work late. That doesn’t mean giving them a pass, but mapping out workarounds upfront lets them know in advance how to make up what they may miss.

Re-emphasize concepts and scaffold. Because stress affects memory, students will need more reminders than usual about when assignments are due, what was previously covered in class, and how it connects to what they are learning next. Build those guideposts into your syllabus, course-management system, and class meetings.

Involve students. During times of trauma, people often feel as if they lack control over their lives. That will probably be true as people return to campus, uncertain of the physical risks they face. So ask students to contribute to the design of the course in meaningful ways. Perhaps they could create a class assignment, or suggest how they would measure what they're learning. Imad calls that providing students with voice and choice. "It's this idea that we're going to do this together," she says. "It gives students agency."

Don't take things personally. You may have already experienced this feeling during the spring when students didn't show up for Zoom sessions or turn in assignments. If students seem tuned out, experts say, it's not because you bore them. They may simply be unable to focus. Imad recalls how one student, after watching a webinar on how trauma affects learning, realized that feeling numb and unmotivated had nothing to do with her professor, but rather was a reaction to her stress over the coronavirus.

While face-to-face teaching will heighten some stressors, learning remotely will also remain a challenge for many students, teaching experts note. So these same suggestions can apply to teaching online in the fall.

Have you found an effective way to adjust your teaching to compensate for some of the recent trauma? If so, write to me, at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, and your story may appear in a future newsletter.

Resources on Trauma-Informed Teaching

To understand more about how trauma and stress affect learning, and how you can adjust your teaching to help, here are some webinars, blogs, and readings you might want to check out.

Mays Imad produced [this webinar](#) on trauma-informed teaching and learning.

Karen Costa, a faculty developer and online teaching expert, shared [these slides](#) she used in a presentation on trauma-aware online teaching.

Janice Carello, an assistant professor at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, offers resources and reading on her blog, [Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning](#).

Reader Recommendations: Books About Teaching Online

Last week we shared a request from a reader who was preparing to teach online in the fall, something he had never done before, and was looking for “a few smart pedagogy books” to help him. We asked for your ideas, and several dozen of you responded. Here are some of your suggestions.

- *[Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes](#)*, by Flower Darby and James M. Lang. “It’s a great book and an easy read, filled with many concrete and helpful tips for teaching online,” one reader wrote. “But more than that: It’s about good teaching in general -- as well as what that looks like online -- so it’s a resource that is helpful not only as we plan for emergency online teaching but also for teaching moving beyond the pandemic.”
- *[Online Teaching at Its Best: Merging Instructional Design With Teaching and Learning Research](#)*, by Linda B. Nilson and Ludwika A. Goodson. “Very practical, based on sound pedagogical principles, includes good examples, useful for newcomers or experienced online faculty,” wrote one professor.
- *[Minds Online: Teaching Effectively With Technology](#)*, by Michelle M. Miller. “This book is helpful,” wrote one reader, “because it informs readers about the science behind online learning, and provides practical guidance to support development of effective online courses.”

We’ll share more in the coming weeks. If you have a book recommendation (podcasts and videos are also welcomed), you can [tell us here](#).

A Reminder

The Chronicle will host a virtual forum on fostering student engagement this fall -- likely to be a challenge either in person or online -- at 2 p.m., Eastern time, tomorrow, June 5. Beckie and our colleague Ian Wilhelm will join two panelists, Sarah Rose Cavanagh and Josh Eyler, to share some ideas -- and hear yours. [Join us here](#).

The following Friday, June 12, Beth will moderate a panel discussion in another *Chronicle* virtual forum, on how colleges can move from emergency remote instruction to effective online teaching. [Join us here](#).

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us, at dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beckie.supiano@chronicle.com, or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

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