Teaching Online During COVID-19: Lessons Learned About Creating Connection Through Trauma-Informed Teaching and Communicating Social Presence

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As the COVID-19 pandemic lingers, it is likely that educators will continue to encounter students experiencing trauma. How can we reach out to our students who appear outwardly to be doing fine? This essay considers three major lessons learned from teaching online during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, by implementing the principles of trauma-informed teaching, instructors can enhance students' online learning experience by creating environments encouraging safety, autonomy, and motivation. Next, educators can also create cultures of support and understanding when teaching online classes by regularly engaging in social presence to intentionally connect with students. Finally, instructors can commit to continued growth and professional development to enhance the efficacy of their online teaching practices.

Keywords: online instruction, trauma-informed teaching, social presence, COVID-19

Introduction

In March 2020, I was teaching four face-to-face undergraduate communication classes. Due to the increasing severity of COVID-19, my institution, like so many others, shifted the delivery of classes to totally asynchronous online formats. Luckily, I had experience taking and teaching online classes, so the shift to online instruction was not difficult for me. I quickly discovered there was much I still had to learn, however. While I tried to stay connected to all my students through email, invitations to video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom and Teams), and through our learning management system (LMS), I spent more time checking in with my introductory and junior-level students than my seniors. I rationalized that because of their level of experience, the seniors needed less direction and interaction with me. My assumption was very wrong. When I read my course evaluations for the Spring 2020 semester, I realized my senior-level students needed just as much connection and support. In their evaluations, my senior students indicated I could have spent more time providing support and staying connected once the university went fully online.

As I write this essay, increasingly transmissible variants such as Delta and Omicron mean we are continuing to struggle with the ongoing effects of COVID-19. Educators continue to encounter students who are experiencing trauma and will need to maintain their support of students in the upcoming years by engaging in trauma-informed teaching practices. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines individual trauma as:

> an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (2021, para. 2).

As Mersky et al. (2019) explain, an experience is traumatic when it produces psychological distress or harm. Furthermore, Harper and Neubauer (2021) point out understanding trauma means considering the nature of an event, how people experience an event, and the adverse effects of an event. Since each of us experiences and processes trauma differently, how can educators reach out to students who appear outwardly to be doing fine? In this essay, I will share three major ideas I learned about online teaching during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will examine the following: first, how we

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as educators can better support our students who may be experiencing trauma; next, the need for educators to create a sense of instructor social presence in our online classes; and, finally, how we can further develop our online teaching effectiveness.

Trauma-Informed Teaching

Do you recall how unsettling and traumatic the sudden onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic was to students and faculty? Our world and our assumptions changed quickly. Many students were experiencing trauma in their personal and academic lives due to the sudden loss of connections with friends and families. Some students experienced tremendous trauma from the deaths of friends and family members. To make matters worse, they could not grieve at funerals. The normal rites of passage such as commencement were cancelled, postponed, or drastically modified. Our students were unable to celebrate their achievements as they had hoped, and they felt isolation and uncertainty resulting from social distancing requirements (Hafetz-Mirman et al., 2022; Sirrine et al., 2021).

The first step is to realize the impact of traumatic events on our students. Some of our students are resilient and will recover from the adverse effects of the pandemic lockdown. Other students will be honest about their struggles. Still others may mask their feelings or not fully be aware of the degree to which they are suffering. As educators we cannot assume all of our students are fine. According to Carello and Butler (2015), being trauma-informed means understanding how "traumatic experiences may have impacted the lives of the individuals involved and [applying] that understanding to the design of systems and provision of services so they accommodate trauma survivors needs and are consonant with healing and recovery" (p. 264). Therefore, minimizing the risk of inadvertent retraumatization is a fundamental tenet of trauma-informed practice.

When implementing trauma-informed teaching principles, Carello and Butler (2015) emphasize ensuring students' emotional and physical safety is fundamental to creating a learning-conducive atmosphere. A key assumption of trauma-informed teaching practice is the importance of developing a safe learning environment. An awareness of safety issues in the online as well as face-to-face classroom means considering such factors as *student characteristics* (recognize students may bring individual experiences and trauma histories impacting their learning), *content and presentation processing* (consider how course content can potentially affect students based on their experiences and histories), *assignment requirements and policies* (implement practices and policies to avoid shaming, disturbing, or triggering students), *instructor behavior* (avoid dismissiveness, threats, ridicule, and displays of impatience and disappointment to students), *student behavior* (address disruptive and disrespectful behavior from students), and *classroom characteristics* (seek out student feedback and suggestions for creating a safe learning space).

Crosby et al. (2020) argue trauma-informed practice is not a "one-size-fits-all program or intervention—it is dynamic and must change according to the needs of those in the impacted system" (p. 2). Furthermore, as educators strive to meet the needs of students during the COVID-19 pandemic, they can apply trauma-informed practices to their online instructional methods. To foster a sense of safety and normalcy online, instructors can establish consistency in their expectations and instructions about student coursework. For example, Cavanaugh (2016) contends students who have experienced trauma "may need additional supports to ensure consistency in their environment including advanced warnings for transitions, reminders, or specific information about changes in the routine" (p. 42). Since COVID-19 has resulted in the world feeling much more precarious and inconsistent, clear and consistent online communication between instructors and students can help reduce uncertainty, establish familiar routines, and enhance students' sense of autonomy in navigating chaotic life events.

Instructors should also design assignments in their online classes intended to inspire student creativity, self-reflection, experiential learning, and critical thinking (Bates, 2014). For instance, group work, discussions, internships, service-learning, and case-based learning can encourage students to actively engage with their classmates, work collaboratively at problem-solving, share ideas, provide and receive feedback, improve time-management, and enhance cultural awareness and perspective-taking. In

addition, increases in student motivation (Ruzek et al., 2016), engagement (Roman, 2020), and self-efficacy (Hitchcock et al., 2021) can occur when instructors establish student-centered learning environments where empathy, emotional support, mutuality, recognition of diversity, and feelings of safety exist. Likewise, instructors can nurture greater connection and engagement with students by creating and maintaining a sense of social presence in their online classes.

Communicating Instructor Social Presence Online

According to Morreale et al. (2021), communication research has generated several variables considered to be essential components of instructional communication competence, including immediacy, affinity, relational power, credibility, clarity, and humor. Of particular interest to online instructional communication scholars is teacher immediacy, also known as instructor presence. Bialowas and Steimel (2019) discuss the concept of "connection" in learning environments as being explained by teacher immediacy and social presence and frame social presence as a subset of immediacy. Infante et al. (2010) define immediacy behaviors as "messages (both verbal and nonverbal) that signal feelings of warmth, closeness, and involvement with another person" (p. 235). Teacher immediacy behaviors communicate closeness and reduce perceptions of distance between teachers and students (Anderson, 1979). Teacher verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors have been associated with students' increased affective and cognitive learning, motivation, and satisfaction (Schutt et al., 2009).

Hazel et al. (2014) describe social presence perspectives as emphasizing "the importance of positive interactions (e.g., immediacy and intimacy) between communicators, which can be positively or negatively affected by the communication medium" (p. 314). Baker (2010) illustrates the positive outcomes teacher immediacy and instructor presence have on student affective learning, perceived cognitive learning, and motivation in online teaching and learning contexts. By engaging in immediacy and establishing social presence in their online classes, instructors can implement trauma-informed teaching practices increasing student perceptions of connection, emotional support, and safety (Rawle, 2021).

Darby and Lang (2019) discuss the advantages of instructors creating a sense of community online and making it part of their course planning and facilitation. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) research on the zone of proximal development, learning can be enhanced when students work collaboratively with their peers and instructors. The implications for interaction and collaboration between students and instructors highlights the benefits of creating communities of inquiry in online learning environments. Moreover, instructors can build community and establish social presence in their online classes by showing up regularly and setting the tone for communication expectations. Instructors should make their presence known by frequently and supportively responding to student questions and discussion posts in a timely manner. To communicate immediacy, warmth, and liking, instructors can use student names to personalize their feedback, express gratitude for student contributions, and provide personal examples illustrating their own experiences on the topic.

Another way instructors can establish and maintain online social presence is by posting frequent text or video announcements (Bialowas & Steimel, 2019). Garrison et al. (1999) describe the communication function of social presence as related to "the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as 'real' people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used" (p. 94). Instructor announcements can build a sense of community online by keeping students focused and updated on course goals, providing clarification, establishing consistency and routine, reducing uncertainty, addressing misunderstandings, summarizing outcomes, making observations, and highlighting class achievements. The first weeks of lockdown were so profoundly isolating that my students, regardless of age or class standing, needed social connection and support. Checking in with students on a regular basis can provide reassurance, reinforce a sense of structure, enhance motivation, and satisfy needs for community and connection during times of trauma.

In order to develop community and reduce the potential for feelings of distance to occur in our online classes, Thacker (2021) emphasizes the significance of instructors engaging with empathy. Some

suggestions for increasing empathy online include intentional efforts such as learning about students as people, creating opportunities for informal interactions over Zoom, checking in through email and discussions regularly, using mid-term course evaluations to obtain student feedback, and treating student disclosures with care and confidentiality. Our students are real people with hopes, aspirations, pressures, and lives outside of class. Designing online classes to include empathy means taking into consideration the perspectives, experiences, and challenges students bring with them to the learning situation (Vann, 2017). By taking the time to listen and connect with our students, we can cultivate a culture of support and understanding in our online classes. Showing support means reaching out to students, actively listening to their concerns, and exercising flexibility when necessary to help them build resilience, persist and succeed.

Developing Online Teaching Effectiveness

It is one thing to say we need to create social presence in our online classes and design instruction that includes trauma-informed practices. Yet, what we do in our online instruction must also be *effective*. Darby and Lang (2019) discuss several professional development strategies for improving our online teaching effectiveness. One strategy is to actually take an online class to experience what it feels like to be an online student, learn more about online teaching, and discover instructional techniques to possibly implement into our own classes. Another strategy is to intentionally seek out experts and adopt their approaches. This involves engaging in online professional development opportunities, attending online conferences, webinars, and workshops, and participating in learning communities to encourage collaboration with colleagues. Similarly, we can also improve our instructional practices by obtaining certification for our online courses based on a quality rubric, such as Quality Matters (QM). Moreover, we can integrate learner-centered approaches into the design of our online courses by incorporating trauma-informed teaching practices that benefit students by removing barriers to learning and engagement (Carello & Butler, 2015; Crosby, 2015; Hitchcock et al., 2021; Sanders, 2021). In addition, we as educators may also be experiencing trauma of our own due to the ongoing pandemic. As Harper and Neubauer (2021) explain, "COVID-19 is unique in that we are all experiencing the trauma of living, working, and learning during a pandemic, and thus those who are responsible for delivering trauma-informed educational activities are experiencing the same or similar COVID-specific stressors" (p. 17). Thus, it becomes essential for all of us to recognize how we are affected by trauma and practice self-care by "understanding that our own health and well-being impacts how we care for our students and how our students engage in the classroom" (Crosby et al., 2020, p. 4). Regardless of the personal and professional development strategies we follow, improving our efficacy as online instructors, especially during times of trauma, is an intentional ongoing process requiring time and effort to develop.

Conclusions

Considering how the pandemic has shaped what we consider the "new normal" for technology enhanced teaching and learning, Schapiro (2021) describes several positive outcomes of online instruction students find especially beneficial to their learning. Overall, students expressed their appreciation of listening to recorded lectures, interacting with guest speakers over Zoom, getting to know their instructors as real people, and likewise having their instructors show genuine interest in them. The lessons to be learned from teaching online during the time of COVID-19 suggest online teaching and learning can result in positive learning outcomes for students.

Morreale et al. (2021) argue online education is now a given and "students of today and tomorrow have moved beyond the face-to-face experience, which many faculty prefer, to all sorts of mediated communication." (p. 118). As such, they make a case for the communication discipline to take the lead in studying how we can improve our instructional communication competence in online teaching and learning contexts. As I have suggested in this essay, by implementing principles of trauma-informed teaching, we can enhance our students' online learning experience by creating an environment

encouraging safety, autonomy, and motivation. We can also create cultures of support and understanding in our online classes by regularly engaging in immediacy and social presence to intentionally connect with students. Moreover, we can commit to continued growth and professional development to enhance the efficacy of our online teaching practices.

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