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VIRTUAL HIGHER EDUCATION

A Guide for Enhancing Virtual Higher Education
Environments with a Trauma-Informed Approach

ResilientGEORGIA

Benefits and Challenges of Online Teaching:

The medium of online education grew massively during the pandemic and changed the way students learn. With increased access and flexibility, students and instructors adapted to diverse learning styles using multimedia resources and digital communication tools. Online learning fosters inclusivity through enhanced collaboration, personalized feedback, and cost-effective implementation, offering students more flexibility and control over their education. It expands access to high-quality content, regardless of location, while minimizing the impact of race, gender, or disability through a more anonymous environment. This format encourages self-direction, critical thinking, and innovative teaching methods by including expert guests and dynamic interactions with teachers and peers.

With that in mind, professionals in online teaching still face significant challenges, including the lack of immediate support in virtual settings and the difficulty in providing a space before and after class sessions. These issues can hinder the ability of educators to offer timely assistance and create a smooth transition between sessions, impacting both teaching effectiveness and student engagement. (*eLearning Industry*)



What is Trauma-Informed Teaching?

Trauma-informed teaching is an educational approach that incorporates principles of trauma-informed care into teaching practices, recognizing that traditional methods may not suit individuals who have faced significant adversity or trauma. This approach acknowledges the widespread impact of trauma and creating supportive, understanding environments that focus on safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and trustworthiness. It involves shifting the perspective from "what is wrong with you?" to "what has happened to you?" and requires continuous attention, caring awareness, and sensitivity. (*Indiana University Bloomington*)

Why does it matter?

Trauma can significantly impact students' learning and overall well-being, making a trauma-informed approach essential in education. This approach recognizes and respects students' experiences, helping create an inclusive environment where all students can engage in meaningful learning. Trauma can lead to poorer academic performance, difficulties with concentration and focus, an increase in absences, heightened sensitivity to criticism, and behavioral changes such as withdrawal from group activities, self-isolation, or increased irritability. By adopting trauma-informed practices, educators can support the diverse needs of all students, especially those with trauma histories, maximizing the benefits of online learning opportunities. (*Indiana University Bloomington*)



Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies: Inside the Virtual Classroom

1. Pre-Class Preparation

- Establish ground rules in the syllabus that focus on a culture of mutual respect in the virtual classroom, including a statement about confidentiality to promote student privacy. Discuss these ground rules in the first session to create a shared understanding and allow students to add additional rules to ensure shared ownership. This will create a safe space for them to share their personal experiences. ([Drexel University](#))
- Promote consistency in the class structure and provide content warnings for materials and assignments that contain potentially triggering content. Informing students about upcoming sensitive content allows them to prepare emotionally and mentally ahead of the class. Be sure to regularly remind students of any supportive services the organization has to offer and how they can access them ([University of Georgia](#))

2. During the Class

- Start sessions with grounding practices, like mindfulness exercises. This can help center students and create a calm atmosphere.
- Use inclusive language in all course materials and discussions. This makes sure the classroom is respectful of all identities and experiences. ([Indiana University Bloomington](#))
- Turn off recording features during the class discussion sessions. This ensures privacy and allows students to speak freely.

3. Facilitating Peer Interaction

- Organize breakout rooms. Breakout rooms in virtual learning help reduce isolation and encourage active participation by enabling smaller group discussions, fostering a sense of community.
- Assign group projects and interview-based assignments to promote teamwork and foster connections. Group projects not only help students develop communication skills but also foster a sense of accountability and shared responsibility. Interview-based assignments can help students develop networking skills and learn to seek information and insights from various sources, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter. ([Indiana University Bloomington](#))

4. Post Class

- Sign off by staying on the Zoom link five minutes after every class. This allows the students space to discuss any immediate doubts they had during the class.
- Implement a feedback collection system. This can be done through an anonymous Google form link that is sent out at the beginning of the semester. ([University of Georgia](#))

Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies: Outside the Virtual Classroom

1. Engaging with Students

- Schedule regular office hours for the students. Additional hours can be offered for course materials that discuss sensitive content.
- Institute a class learning community. Students can have optional community sessions regularly to engage with each other and share diverse perspectives and how they relate to class topics.

2. Assignments and Grading

- Offer Flexibility in grading. A no-questions-asked assignment policy (e.g. 72-hours) extension will respect students' personal circumstances regarding late work and participation.
- Offer alternative assignments. Some assignments might be distressing for some students, and this will provide them with a different way to participate.

3. Privacy of Student

- Some students may be uncomfortable speaking out loud. Allow students to participate in discussions through alternative methods such as written responses via chat.
- Be mindful of verbal and nonverbal reactions/behaviors and be sure to check in with students after class or via email to show your support and give the student an opportunity to open up.

4. Mental Health Support

- Facilitate peer support groups where students can share experiences and support each other.
- Implement a restorative justice system with peer juries to discuss where the student can hear how their actions affected the other party, and the offending student can respond
- Encourage self-care and mental health awareness. A resource list with campus counseling services and hotlines, breathing techniques, and strategies to cope with stress can be circulated.

5. Tips for Teachers

- Expect unexpected responses from students. They may be responding due to unknown triggers, and these reactions shouldn't be taken personally.
- Check in with the students with a small ice breaker before each class. This will help gauge the emotional and mental state of the students.
- Pay attention to student demeanor, comments and responses to identify changes that may signify distress or the need for additional support.
- Build your skills in stress management and self-care to aid in modeling healthy behaviors. (*University of Georgia*)

Trauma-Informed Teaching Resources:

- **Trauma-Informed Teaching | UGA** - This resource defines trauma-informed teaching and provides resources that educators can use to build their knowledge base and cultivate approaches to utilizing trauma-informed practices in learning environments.
- **Trauma-Informed Teaching | Indiana University Bloomington** - The Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning outlines the importance of trauma-informed teaching and highlights principles of trauma-informed care including safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and trustworthiness.
- **Resources for Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies | Emory University** - This listing of resources was developed by Emory University's Center for Faculty Development and Excellence. It includes articles, presentations, and resources lists by organizations and leaders in the higher education sector.
- **Trauma Informed Online Teaching | Every Learner Everywhere** - This article provides information on identifying trauma in virtual education settings, applying trauma-informed teaching practices online, and principles for creating supportive online environments.
- **Trauma Informed Teaching | Duke University** - This article gives an overview of trauma-informed teaching using a case study from their Divinity School's Certificate in Theology and Health Care. It outlines challenges and opportunities for online teaching, strategies for teaching a trauma-informed course, teaching with care, and additional resources.

Trauma-Informed Training Resources:

- **Training Roadmap | Resilient Georgia**: A guide for trauma-informed practices within organizations based on the Missouri Model, with tailored trainings and resources available for various sectors.
- **GSU Online Training** - This training provides participants with knowledge that serves as a foundation for understanding and beginning to address childhood trauma and traumatic stress and its impact on brain development.
- **Recognizing & Managing Secondary Traumatic Stress** – This training builds an understanding of secondary traumatic stress and strategies to prevent or mitigate it.
- **Connections Matter Georgia** - This training helps participants build caring connections that improve resiliency, prevent childhood trauma, and better understand the positive impact they can make on those who have experienced trauma.
- **Community Resiliency Model (CRM)** - This training equips community members with skills to support regulation of themselves and others, and re-set the natural balance of the nervous system.
- **Adult Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)** - In this training participants gain skills to identify, understand, and respond to mental health and substance use challenges.



FOR MORE TRAUMA-INFORMED RESOURCES, VISIT [RESILIENTGA.ORG](https://resilientga.org)

Questions or feedback?
Contact info@resilientga.org.

