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Trauma Informed Pedagogy: A Much-Needed Intervention for Higher Education

The way we work has changed, and it has been no different for the education sector. Almost overnight, the Covid-19 pandemic pivoted our institutions of learning into emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL). At the same time, other key changes were taking place. In “Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now” (2020), Dr. Mays Imad claims that both educators and learners have experienced traumatic effects due to the pandemic, with implications for teaching and learning. The prolonged social isolation and the enhanced situational ambiguity wrought by the pandemic are viewed by our brains as threats, leading to physiological re-prioritization: survival mode kicks in, and learning becomes more difficult. Imad argues that a rethinking of the learning process, the way we teach, and more specifically, the adoption of a trauma informed approach to both teaching and learning can provide a trajectory for the future of education in our pandemic world. The benefits of this pedagogy redound to both educator and learner alike, particularly the learner in higher education.

A trauma informed approach in higher education means understanding the ways in which crisis and trauma impact students and educators individually and collectively and using that understanding to promote healing and learning. It means being sensitive to the complexities of crisis while fostering resilience and growth through specific learning and teaching strategies. As commentators argue, this approach doesn't mean that educators have to be mental health experts, but at the very least, they should have a basic understanding and awareness of trauma-induced behaviours and how to mitigate them to help our learners feel safe, empowered and connected.

Educators can help their anxious, stressed learners feel safe by enhancing social presence in the learning environment, particularly online environments. We can provide a model for learners by revealing, within reason, how you, the educator, are handling the current situation or re-establishing social connections. Online platforms such as Edmodo allow educators to create informal anonymous polls that use

emojis which measure the daily emotional thermostat of their students. Even informal inquiries during synchronous sessions can initiate and foster nascent connections between educators and students alike

Trustworthiness can be further enhanced through transparency in one's teaching. We need concise course objectives, assessments and activities with clear guidelines, with relevant rubrics for grading. In addition, there is a need for re-emphasis and scaffolding; as experts note, stress affects memory, so students need more reminders. This includes course housekeeping notices, reviews on previous material and how it connects with future content. Educators can achieve this through integration of signposts in course outlines and utilization of notification tools on their course management systems (inclusive of online assessments). Online quizzes that assess foundational concepts can be created to be self-graded and allow for multiple responses to help students achieve their learning goals, and they can also be structured to reinforce scaffolding of course content to give students the required intellectual support.

Promoting collaboration through shared decision making in the learning environment can also encourage meaningful connections and foster empowerment among students. Exit tickets and traffic light worksheets are appropriate tools for this purpose. They allow students to reflect on the delivery of content while nudging them into self-directed learning and meta-cognitive skills. At the same time, faculty gets a snapshot to aid their reflections for future successful sessions. In this way, learners make an active contribution to their learning environment while engaging in healthy educator-student relationships.

Empowerment can also be derived by giving learners choices in their courses and providing alternatives for “life happens” moments. Activities such as asynchronous discussion forums, optional asynchronous modules, extra credit assessments paired with flexible deadlines allow struggling students to remain motivated in

their programmes. These options also demonstrate the “structural malleability and elasticity” that was once thought impossible by higher education industry insiders but which needs to become the “new normal”.

These strategies mean increased work for the educator who is performing miracles with limited resources and compromised internet bandwidth. However, there are options, such as liaising with instructional designers and the IT Department who can help design the supportive online classrooms. In addition, simplifying and re-organizing the course while keeping learning outcomes intact is possible through calibration and adaptation of content using the free versions of online tools such as Google Forms, Ed Puzzle, Factive, PollEverywhere and Breakout Rooms, just to name a few, plus the wealth of online resources provided by other educators. Finally, an instructor interaction plan sets clear boundaries as to hours of online engagement, channels of communication, and netiquette. These are just some methods the trauma informed educator can use to manage this new world.

Overall, a trauma informed pedagogy is a sustainable, long-term approach to higher education that benefits everyone, particularly our angst ridden students. Indeed, as the pandemic moves into its third year, we need mechanisms to help our students achieve their academic goals; we would be failing in our jobs as educators if we did otherwise.

Dr. Saadiqa Khan,
Senior Lecturer and Head of Department, General Education Studies