

Trauma-Informed Teaching Competencies In Higher Education



By Marjorie Florestal, JD, MA, PhD(c)

Founder, Blackbird Trauma Training

www.blackbirdtt.com

Introduction

Colleges and universities must maintain rigorous academic standards as they educate students who are navigating rising levels of personal, historical, and collective trauma. For professors, the challenge is not only to recognize these dynamics but also to create an environment that fosters both learning and well-being.

The *Trauma-Informed Teaching Competencies for Professors* guide invites academics to reflect on what it means to build trauma-informed classrooms. How can professors balance rigorous academic standards with the emotional realities students face? What strategies and competencies are essential to navigate this space effectively? This guide offers practical tools and frameworks to address these questions, helping educators create a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Whether you are an experienced professor or just beginning your teaching journey, this resource provides valuable, actionable insights for fostering resilience and growth in today's complex educational landscape.



Core Competencies in Trauma-Informed Teaching Practice

Effective trauma-informed teaching begins with competency in a set of core principles. Without foundational understanding of trauma and resilience, it can be easy to misinterpret dysregulation as disengagement, guardedness as disinterest, or moral injury as lack of professionalism.

Developing these core competencies does not require professors to become therapists. It merely requires a working knowledge of how stress and trauma affect learning, behavior, and institutional participation within the higher education context.

Trauma-informed practice requires more than interpersonal sensitivity; it requires awareness of how institutional structures themselves may reproduce harm.

Foundational Knowledge

1. Demonstrate working knowledge of the concepts of trauma and resilience.
2. Explain the concept of the “window of tolerance” and its relevance to students’ ability to engage in learning.
3. Analyze how trauma affects emotional regulation, cognitive processing, and interpersonal dynamics in the classroom.
4. Describe the prevalence of trauma among students in higher education and its implications for engagement and retention.
5. Define and describe the effects of vicarious trauma, moral injury, secondary trauma, and burnout on students and professors.

Manifestations of Trauma

6. Explore how trauma may surface in classroom interactions, course content or reading materials that involve violence, oppression, or dehumanization.

For example, a student may become activated after reading materials that explicitly describe sexual violence or that use racially abusive language (e.g., the “N” word). When such activation is ignored under the mistaken belief that exposure alone builds intellectual resilience or reflects “real-world” conditions, harm is compounded, trust in the learning environment erodes, and students’ capacity for sustained intellectual engagement is diminished.

Systemic Context

7. Examine how discrimination, marginalization, and bias in higher education and society at large can produce or compound trauma for students.
8. Analyze how structural and social contexts increase students' vulnerability to academic challenges.
9. Identify institutional policies, cultural norms, and representational gaps within higher education that may re-traumatize students or impede learning, including the absence of faculty and administrators who share marginalized identities and can validate and contextualize students' lived experience.

Mitigation and Teaching Strategies

Mitigation in a trauma-informed classroom does not mean lowering standards. Rather, it calls for intentionally structuring the learning environment in ways that allow students to meet those standards.

10. Apply strategies that support students' capacity for sustained engagement, including predictable classroom structures, transparent expectations, supportive faculty-student relationships, and practices that help regulate stress responses.
11. Implement key principles of trauma-informed teaching, including safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural humility, in ways that preserve academic rigor while reducing avoidable harm.



Classroom Practice: Applying Trauma-Informed Principles and Practices

Effective teaching integrates trauma-informed principles and practices into all aspects of the learning environment while maintaining academic rigor and cultivating safety, empowerment, and respect.

General Principles

1. **Recognize Signs of Stress Activation and Trauma:** Identify indicators such as withdrawal, agitation, emotional dysregulation, or difficulty concentrating, and respond with appropriate pedagogical adjustments to support re-engagement.
2. **Establish Trust:** Create a classroom environment grounded in clear expectations and mutual respect.
3. **Encourage Resilience and Self-Care:** Promote strategies that help students build adaptive skills, such as self-reflection, peer collaboration, and stress management practices.

Class Discussions

1. **Set the Tone:** Establish ground rules for respectful dialogue, ensuring students feel safe sharing their perspectives without fear of ridicule or attack.
2. **Monitor Dynamics:** Attend to power imbalances or microaggressions and intervene when necessary to preserve a productive learning environment.

3. **Encourage Choice:** Offer students a measure of autonomy in how they engage with triggering topics, and—where practicable—allow alternative methods of participation.
4. **Incorporate Regulation Strategies:** Build in reflective pauses, structured transitions, and other practices that support emotional regulation during discussions of difficult material.

Reading Materials

1. **Use Content Warnings:** Provide advance notice when course materials address sensitive or traumatic themes (e.g., violence, discrimination) to allow students to prepare while maintaining expectations for academic engagement.
2. **Integrate Critical Analysis with Trauma Awareness:** Guide students in critically reading and analyzing traumatic material with awareness that students' responses will vary, and that exposure to such content may activate personal or intergenerational trauma.
3. **Promote Reflection:** Encourage students to explore how their own experiences and biases might shape their interpretations.

Assessments and Grading

1. **Offer Flexible Options:** When appropriate, design varied assessment formats (e.g., written reflections, oral presentations) to accommodate diverse learning styles and stress load.

2. **Use Strength-Based Feedback:** Provide feedback that identifies demonstrated strengths and offers clear, actionable guidance for improvement.
3. **Ensure Transparency:** Clearly communicate grading criteria and expectations to reduce stress and ambiguity.



Responding to Trauma Disclosure

Students may disclose experiences of trauma in classroom discussions, written assignments, office hours, or informal interactions. These moments can be emotionally charged and professionally complex. Faculty must balance empathy with appropriate role boundaries while responding in ways that do not inadvertently retraumatize students.

1. Respond with Empathy and Validation:

- Actively listen to students and acknowledge their disclosures without judgment.
- Use validating phrases
 - *Example: "I appreciate you trusting me with this," or "What you're feeling is completely understandable."*

2. **Practice Containment:**

- Recognize that simply recounting events can potentially cause retraumatization.
- Allow students to control how much they share and when, ensuring they do not feel pressured to disclose more than they are comfortable with.
 - *Example: "You can share as much or as little as you feel comfortable. I'm here to listen."*

3. **Know Your Limits:**

- Recognize the boundaries of your role as a professor. You are not expected to serve as a counselor but can play a critical role as an empathetic witness and in connecting students with appropriate resources.

4. **Provide Resources:**

- Familiarize yourself with campus and community resources, such as counseling services, mental health hotlines, and student support offices.
 - *Example: "I want to make sure you get the support you need. Would it be helpful if I connected you with [specific resource]?"*

5. **Follow Up Appropriately:**

- Without prying, check in with students after a disclosure to show continued care and concern.

- *Example: "I just wanted to see how you're doing and if there's anything else you need right now."*

6. **Ensure Confidentiality While Adhering to Reporting Obligations:**

- Maintain students' privacy to the greatest extent possible while complying with legal and institutional reporting requirements (e.g., mandatory reporting of abuse or threats to safety).
- **Clearly communicate these limits to students upfront:**
 - *Example: "Your privacy is important to me, and I will keep our conversation confidential whenever possible. However, there are certain situations—like concerns about your safety or the safety of others—where I am required to share information with [specific institutional authority]."*



Personal and Professional Development

Trauma-informed education requires faculty who are themselves supported and regulated. Chronic exposure to student distress, institutional pressure, and high-stakes academic environments can erode professional capacity over time. Sustaining faculty well-being is therefore integral to maintaining a trauma-informed classroom and campus.

1. **Recognize and Address Professional Challenges:** Identify signs of compassion fatigue, moral injury, and burnout in oneself. Develop strategies to prevent and mitigate these effects, such as setting boundaries, taking restorative breaks, and engaging in reflective practices.
2. **Emotional Regulation:** Cultivate skills like mindfulness, grounding techniques, and deep breathing to stay within the window of tolerance while teaching and interacting with students.
3. **Reflect on Personal Trauma:** Consider how personal experiences with trauma may shape interactions with students and colleagues, and seek professional development or peer support when needed.
4. **Build Supportive Networks:** Seek trauma-informed mentoring and peer support to share challenges, gain insights, and maintain professional vitality. Consider forming peer groups for regular discussions on teaching and well-being.
5. **Advocate for Institutional Support:** Support initiatives that provide mental health training, counseling services, and wellness programs for professors and students. Partner with colleagues to present evidence-based proposals to your institution.

About the Author

Marjorie Florestal, JD, MA, PhD(c), is the CEO and principal consultant of Blackbird Trauma Training Company. She brings a unique interdisciplinary perspective to her work, combining over 25 years of experience in legal education and practice with advanced degrees in psychology and human development, as well as specialized training in several trauma healing modalities.

Marjorie earned a JD from New York University School of Law, where she was a Root-Tilden-Snow Scholar, an International Law Fellow, and a staff editor for the *Journal of International Law and Politics*. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to France, where she studied comparative immigration law and policy.

Marjorie also holds an MA in Jungian Psychology from Sonoma State University, an MA in Human Development from Fielding Graduate University, and is completing a PhD in Human Development with a concentration in coaching at Fielding.

She is trained in several trauma-healing modalities, including: NeuroAffective Relational Model (NARM), a somatic-based approach to addressing developmental trauma; Healing the Wounds of History, a drama therapy process that catalyzes collective healing; and Pure Belonging, a somatic process aimed at restoring nervous system capacity.

A former tenured professor at the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law, and a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, and UC Davis, Marjorie has taught courses in the fields of international trade and commercial law, as well as the first year contracts offering. She developed and taught the first course on trauma-informed lawyering at UC Davis Law School.

An award-winning writer, Marjorie is co-author of *The Trauma-Informed Lawyer* (ABA, 2023) and has published on cross-cultural pedagogy, race, and the transformative power of narrative, as well as on issues of international trade law.



Marjorie Florestal, JD, MA,
PhD (candidate)

www.blackbirdtt.com

hello@blackbirdtt.com