

Teaching in Troubled Times

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy & Safe-ish Spaces - September 12, 2019

This program is part of an ongoing discussion series exploring issues of equity and inclusion in teaching and learning. Launched in 2017, the [Teaching in Troubled Times series](#) is presented by the [Division of Equity & Inclusion](#), the [Center for Teaching and Learning](#), the [American Cultures Center](#), and the [Academic Innovation Studio](#).

Panelists:

- [Zeus Leonardo, Associate Dean and Professor, Graduate School of Education](#)
- [Elida Bautista, Director of Diversity and Inclusion, Haas School of Business](#)
- [Elisa Huerta, Director, Multicultural Community Center](#)

Facilitator:

- [Victoria Robinson, Faculty, Ethnic Studies, and Director of the American Cultures Center](#)

Terms to Consider:

Trauma: encountering, witnessing, and/or being near threat to life.

- [Listen to panelists' discussion on trauma.](#)
- Read more on Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, as researched by Dr. Joy DeGruy

Violence: violating the standards of a human condition.

- Examples:
 - Dehumanizing violence: Nazism.
 - Humanizing violence: women's rights, black panthers and the civil rights movement, decolonization.
- Self-Violence:
 - The right to violate what we have all accepted as a standard of some kind of humanity, to self-reflect and be self-critical.
 - Listen to discussions on self-violence. [[1:04:48](#)]
- [Listen to the panelists' discussion on violence.](#)

Generosity: understanding your sense of incompleteness and being in communion amongst others

- “[Generosity] is humanist, not humanitarian. It is not condescension, not paternalism.” - Dr. Leonardo
- [Listen to the panelists' discussion on generosity.](#)

Disclaimer. The panelists explored generosity more as a conceptual term, especially as it relates to pedagogy than as a feeling and ethos as it is used in common parlance. To read more about generosity as a pedagogical concept please reference the following.

Excerpt from [Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire](#):

“Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity,” the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this “generosity,” which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the “rejects of life,” to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that this hands-whether of individuals or entire peoples-need to be extended less and less in supplication so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world.” (2017, pg. 44-45)

Scaffolding the Classroom and Place of Learning

Think about your role in the classroom

- Consider how your role in creating structure in a classroom and/or within a program. Such structures can include establishing community standards and follow-up procedures when there is a violation of a standard.
- Consider the complex problems students face and how they are part of bigger systemic issues. Recognize that the bureaucracy of the university creates some of these problems. Consider your role in the university--how might it embody the problems that students are facing.
- Reflect: how can we create more generous spaces to help students address these problems?. [Listen to the panelists address this issue. \[26:21\]](#)

Self-regulate and ground yourself

Someone may question your knowledge base or something you misrepresented. Try to prepare for such situations by thinking about possible responses, so that we as instructors are best prepared to reply, hear, and absorb feedback. Prepare responses will uphold community standards and other structures that might have been established. [Listen to the panelists on self-awareness. \[12:42\]](#)

- **Strategies to consider:**
 - Acknowledge mistakes.
 - Do not react with responses modeled with fear or defense. For example:
 - “No, we’re not you.”
 - “That’s not what you’re experiencing.”
 - “That’s not what’s happening.”
 - “That’s not what I said.”
 - Instead, ask questions to try to further understand. For example:
 - “Can we talk more about what happened?”
 - “Can we talk about what your experience was?”
 - “Can you walk me through what happened at that moment?”
 - “Can I hear that?”
 - Alternatively, simply sympathize. Examples:
 - “I’m sorry that you’re feeling excluded at this moment.”
 - “I’m sorry that that happened.”

Evaluate the extent of your knowledge on classroom issues

Just as there are learners at different stages of learning about certain content, there are different forms and experiences with trauma. There is no single way to tap into all of the content’s information. When you create a pedagogical condition try to do so in a way that *everyone is not just a learner but also equally a teacher*. Give everyone the chance to equally share on their own experience so that as an instructor you do not always have to feel and understand a hundred different kinds of trauma. [\[1:22:11\]](#)

Be aware of the student dynamic

Think about and converse with colleagues the different ways in which people think about, talk about, and identify traumas and how these differences may impact students. Teach students how to learn and think about an issue, rather than perpetuating the importance of simply “knowing” about an issue. [Listen to the panelists on the student dynamic. \[28:21\]](#)

Questions to Consider: [\[30:52\]](#)

- *How do we as a university align resources, centers, regulations, etc., so students can thrive rather than worry about living in fear, how they may fail a course because they*

were so overwhelmed by a condition that they could not keep up with academics, or self-care?

Healing work

Create reflection questions for students to journal their interaction(s) with the material. Journaling might not be exactly in class, but this offers an additional structure. Consider what additional structures of support are we offering and giving students so that they can find a way to dive into the material. *The goal is not to have all the answers, but to create a learning environment.* [[1:26:31](#)]

Questions to Consider: [[1:26:44](#)]

- *How do we do have trainings that promote healing for students?*
- *How do students find out their own pressure points vs relying on somebody else--the pedagogue, the professor, the director--to do that for them?*
- *What are additional resources that we offer directly at the front?*
- *What are self-evaluation tools?*
- *What are things are going to come up and what self-reflection questions may arise as students read them?*

Understand that trauma shows up in different ways

If someone lets you know about something that has happened to them, listen without bias of how they are behaving and believe them. There is no norm in how trauma presents itself in different cultures and families. What you as instructors can provide is the structure and predictability for when these injuries, violence, or traumas occur. [[13:47](#)]

- Not all trauma and violence are diminishing: Resilience and resilient growth are how some people, traumatic incidents and events are catapulted to a new level of learning, flourishing and personal growth. [[56:23](#)] [Read more about resilient growth.](#)

Set up a condition of risk in the classroom

Do not reject “living room” conversations about what’s safe--go deeper in explaining to all your students that discussions on race and racism are hardly ever safe, particularly for people of color. If there is a safe place, it is a safe place to take risks and accepts risk. [[9:09](#)]

Acknowledge material conditions of violence

it’s not just classes that address race and ethnicity that are violent. A math class is violent. Many spaces on campus are violent, just because of where we are. Acknowledge the fact that the

material conditions are *the power structures that exist and start from these points* rather than a denial point. [19:04]

Recognize moments of tension and violence in the classroom

Doing so allows students to re-engage in the classroom. Students can feel on some visceral level whether their livelihood is safe in a space, and when that security is taken away, can become a distraction to students. [22:21]

- Some ways to acknowledge tension and violence:
 - Address it in the moment
 - Table it for a later conversation
 - Make it known that you will do something about it and address it, even if you are not sure what it is, in order to prevent further injuring, perpetuating it absolutely.
 - Acknowledge, but be intentional about creating generosity and communicating accountability.
- Signs of discomfort in the classroom:
 - Students may shuffle in seats.
 - Students may look at one another.
 - Read the [gold folder](#) for more information.

An Ongoing Learning

Instructors should work continuously to have an on-going relationship with other instructors and so that they can have conversations and learn more about the issues discussed in this workshop. One workshop is not enough to change decades of established teaching practices. [35:35]

- Create new relationships.
- Seek out more understanding of issues by exposing yourself to events and experiences that analyze them.
- Have conversations with colleagues with different backgrounds and experiences about these issues

Build community

Creating safe-ish spaces that foster safety. Make calls for instructors to be engaged, self-reflexive, and honest with themselves about your own learning moments and traumas. Create a community for you and your colleagues for you to find ways to address issues, such as pedagogy and trauma, and hold each other accountable in doing this work. [19:34]

Creating a Safe Space for Instructors:

Bring others into the room: State their name, credit their work or comment that you may build from. Share your authority or expertise with others as a way of elevating and bringing others into space more formally. [[1:11:19](#)]

Be an accomplice and interrupter and welcome others: Everyone has different safety needs. What are yours? Call into question what individuals and divisions are doing on campus that undermines your safety. Question moments where hierarchy and institutionalism are apparent. Welcome others who are addressing these questions of safety. [[1:18:09](#)]

- For example, interrupt when you hear something about “if you know our work then you know what’s happening”, to interrupt it and to call it into question.

Practicing Generosity within an Institution:

Tap into people-centered motivations and create people-centered structures

Think about what people-centered systems look like. Create structures that are not for the sake of structures, but are flexible for everyone to feel creative and to be held, but not restricted. Often, actions can be money-centered, prestige or power centered, data-centered, etc., but as an institution, we should stand-in for humanity and for people. [[56:59](#)]

Questions to Consider: [[27:10](#)]

- *Do our claims actually happen in practice?*
- *Do we have supportive practices to create an approach for a generous response to learning?*

De-center hierarchy in spaces

Move away from power as a form of authority and think more about accountability and responsibility. Understand that there is no need to assert yourself as an expert or authority figure. Ways to do so: [[39:47](#)]

- Acknowledge material conditions: Understand and acknowledge that there is a hierarchy.
- Collectivize decision-making and share power.
- Ask others to inform you of situations, rather than to ask for permission.
- Be consistent in de-centering hierarchy, no matter their identity or affiliation.

Break down the institutional values of elitism

Generosity is saying everyone is welcome, acknowledging that there is real violence and trauma, and the university is an exclusionary, elitist space. [\[59:21\]](#)

Build bridges, not walls

Build relationships at an institutional and personal level. Ensure strong relationships between academic units or student spaces by building succession plans and through collaboration beyond time or character-driven efforts. [\[40:56\]](#)

Someone who challenges you is not an enemy

Rather, they are a student or a colleague. Be open-minded and generous in how you show up to spaces and how you respond to challenging situations. [\[42:28\]](#)

Practice constructive criticism

Do not simply look over your students' work with a score, a fixed mindset, or standard for correctness. Be generous with how you teach students to grow from their mistakes, and help them gain tools to improve rather than simply giving a certain grade.

- Ask students to explain themselves or their reasoning
- Ask students about the goal of their paper, project or research.
- Refer students to successful examples in academic journals, publications, op-ed from your own experience. [\[57:43\]](#)

Shift the frame of thinking to an abundance model

Do not think about resources as being a reward for competition. Think of time, space, funding, or physical as resources in abundance. The amount [of resources] we have should not be the operating principle for which you dream and imagine what you want to do. [\[1:00:51\]](#)

- Ask students :
 - What do you want to do in this world?
 - What do you want to learn?
 - How do you want to be trained to do certain things?
- Shift the framework for students and the institution alike in these kinds of moments by thoroughly understanding what our guiding principles are.

Be Generous to yourself and others

Collective processes are important. We all need time to be human; we all need to acknowledge trauma and how things are not always perfect and put together. Be generous with yourself. You have become what you are not always because you chose it, but you were born into or put into a situation to make difficult choices.

Forming Relationships

How do you form those relationships that scaffold the space?

Relationships can be knowledge

Knowledge can be things about the world, but inevitably, knowledge is a relationship between subjects and subjects to objects. Generosity becomes a condition that instructors set up. [31:56]

Relationships are critical in these spaces

You cannot open up a discussion that can bring up trauma without setting up the relational work beforehand. [32:47]

- Suggested ways to build relationships with students:
 - Check-in with students.
 - Don't take relationships for granted
 - Impose suggestions.
 - Leave personal suggestions, critiques, and comments on their assignments.
 - Suggest to students to bring food to the classroom and eat with them.
- Learn more about assignments that build relationships on the Teaching in Troubled Times Session: [Assignment Design for Social Justice Education](#).

Integrate relational work

Set up a classroom space where the relational work is a necessary part of the pedagogical work. [34:07]

Embody ultimate trust and ultimate honesty

Do not expect to build ultimate trust in just a few weeks, but do try your best within the semester. Practice ultimate honesty to build trust within the relationship between instructors and students. [37:48]

Be Consistent

Set expectations for what space is, what purpose it serves, how it sits in the conversation.

[\[38:19\]](#)

Open up your time to students

To whatever extent you can authentically share your experiences with your students online or in person. This invites students to know that you are a resource for them and promotes opening up conversations in ways that you can invite your students to visit you in office hours or create a connection that will allow students to follow up with you. Anticipate what in advance you can call out and acknowledge that invites the conversation to continue to happen in a different place.

Remember not to share anything that you have not already processed with somebody you trust or a professional. [\[1:21:23\]](#)