

Recommitting to Trauma-informed Teaching Principles to Support Student Learning: An Example of a Transformation in Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

In our roles as adjunct faculty and full-time higher education administrators managing an online program, we (Marquart & Báez) were already using Trauma Informed Teaching and Learning (TITL) practices in our own classrooms as well as training and mentoring faculty on the use of TITL practices. However, as a result of the pandemic, we both found that our use of trauma-informed teaching and learning practices significantly increased, particularly our compassion, collaboration with students, and flexibility with assignment deadlines. In this essay, we reflect on our individualized experiences as adjunct faculty, one teaching during the first semester of the pandemic in March–May and the other teaching during the second semester of the pandemic in May–July. Because of the collective trauma and distress of the pandemic, we gained a new perspective on a practice we believed in—we reconceptualized TITL practices as much more fundamental to teaching, both now and in the long term.

Keywords: Transformative learning, trauma-informed teaching and learning, TITL, COVID-19 pandemic, pedagogy, online teaching, distance education

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has served as a catalyst for faculty to adopt trauma-informed teaching and learning (TITL) practices, as educators across disciplines have shifted their teaching to be more compassionate, flexible, consistent, and predictable in response to the worldwide trauma and distress (Alhadad et al., 2020; Davidson, 2020; Marquart, Carello, & Báez, 2020; Mascolo, 2020; Strauss, 2020; White & Ruth-Sahd, 2020; Zinger, 2020).

This paper describes the reflective processes of two instructors whose experiences teaching during the pandemic have been transformative and have led to a recommitment to TITL to support student learning. We connect transformative learning theory with TITL, and share the impact of our own transformative experiences on our teaching practices due to the pandemic. Our conceptual framework integrates both transformative learning and TITL, and is grounded in the perspective that the pandemic has been a major life change that has served as a dilemma that drives educators to use trauma-informed practices (SAMHSA, 2014).

An Overview of TITL

A TITL approach to teaching applies six trauma-informed principles to classrooms. These principles, originally developed by Maxine Harris and Roger Fallot (2001), were adapted and expanded upon by the United States' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA,

2014). They were then adapted for higher education by Janice Carello and Lisa Butler (Carello, 2018a; Carello & Butler, 2015). The six principles include: physical, emotional, social, and academic respect; trustworthiness and transparency; support and connection; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; cultural, historical, and gender contexts; and resilience, growth, and change. These principles acknowledge that traumatic experiences are widespread and harmful, and that the long-term impacts of trauma can interfere with academic success (Perry, 2006). The goal of using strategies based on these TITL principles is to mitigate the effects of trauma in order to support student success.

Examples of trauma-informed strategies include providing opportunities for students to share power, such as by co-creating classroom agreements together with students (Collaboration and Mutuality), recognizing students' strengths and resilience, such as by celebrating student successes (Resilience, Growth, and Change), and building in choices for students, such as by allowing students in online classes to respond to questions via chat or webcam (Empowerment, Voice, and Choice).

Ideas related to TITL have been described in terminology such as trauma-aware or trauma-responsive (Missouri, 2014), trauma-sensitive (Alexander, 2019), compassionate teaching (Jennings, 2018), compassionate pedagogy or critical compassionate pedagogy (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Dickson & Summerville, 2018; Hao, 2011), pedagogy of kindness (Denial, 2019), grace before grades (Engler et al, 2020), and Maslow before Bloom (Berger, 2020). At the heart of these approaches is the understanding that educators can promote student achievement by addressing barriers resulting from the impacts of traumatic human experiences, and create classroom communities that promote student wellbeing and learning.

Transformative Learning in a Pandemic

Perspective transformation can either occur through a series of cumulative revisions of our frame of reference or as a result of a personal or social crisis (Taylor, 2008). The coronavirus pandemic catalyzed transformation in our teaching and learning both as a series of cumulative revisions of our frame for teaching online and as a personal and social collective crisis, during a time of continued systematic injustice due to racism and political instability. As Jack Mezirow (1978) described perspective transformation:

There are certain challenges or dilemmas of adult life that cannot be resolved by the usual way we handle problems ... Life becomes untenable, and we undergo significant phases of reassessment and growth in which familiar assumptions are challenged and new directions and commitments are charted ... When a meaning perspective can no longer comfortably deal with anomalies in a new situation, a transformation can occur. (p. 101)

We noted that our teaching became even more inclusive, self-reflective, and integrative (Mezirow, 1997), as we had no choice but to be transformative learners, alongside our students. With our unique lens of being social workers, we embraced conceptions of transformative learning that included holding our students' positionality and intersectionality, an appreciation for the role of relationships, and a centering of context and social change in our transformative experience. We used critical reflection to think about the meaning and implications of the different structures we were using in the online classroom and made changes *with* students based on their feedback. Consistent with an emancipatory perspective on transformative learning, we sought to share power with our students and have them develop their own agency both in the classroom and outside of the classroom to transform society (Freire & Macedo, 1995).

The coronavirus pandemic has been a dilemma that has caused us as educators to challenge our familiar assumptions, chart new directions, and transform. It has altered our self-identity as educators who now have a much stronger commitment to TITL practices, and ultimately in this way, it has improved our teaching.

TITL and Transformative Learning Theory: Two Overlapping Concepts

This essay advances transformative learning theory by connecting it with TITL. There are key elements that connect between transformative learning theory and TITL (Table 1), and both influenced our transformative experience of teaching during the pandemic. Both are learner-centered, encourage student discourse, and involve critical reflection, and they are paradigm shifts that speak to the heart of student learning. Student-centered transformative learning and TITL require an acknowledgment of students’ humanity, and incorporate teaching practices that accommodate needs created by human experience.

As a result of the global pandemic, which has been traumatic and has shifted worldviews on a grand scale, we anticipate that classrooms will be impacted for years to come, and we see value in a long-term pedagogical approach that integrates these complementary frameworks. This approach also supports other times of stress and uncertainty, which are bound to come up in the future.

Table 1

Complementary Aspects of Transformative Learning Theory and TITL

Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning	Transformative Learning Theory
<p>Definition: “TITL is an approach to college curriculum delivery that involves adopting a set of trauma-informed principles to inform educational policies and procedures.” (Marquart, Carello, & Báez, 2020)</p>	<p>Definition: “A process of affecting change in a <i>frame of reference</i>.” (Mezirow, 1997)</p>
<p>Foundational premise: Trauma is a universal human experience, and the majority of adults have been impacted (SAMHSA, 2014)</p>	<p>Foundational premise: Transformative learning theory is “the essence of adult education” (Mezirow, 1997)</p>
<p>TITL principles:</p> <p>Physical, emotional, social, and academic respect</p> <p>Trustworthiness and transparency</p> <p>Support and connection</p>	<p>Elements and perspectives that connect with TITL principles:</p> <p>Educators focus on “engaging with students to mutually examine their own worldviews,” rather than imposing a predetermined view (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020)</p> <p>Building trust entails developing community via a welcoming environment and connecting through vulnerability including via check-in rituals, which leads to freedom and empowerment for learning (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2014)</p> <p>Recognize that “learners may be in the midst of major life changes...drawing on TL theory for understanding can help educators design adaptive support structures and pedagogies appropriate for these extracurricular learning needs” (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020)</p>

Table 1 Continued

Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning	Transformative Learning Theory
Collaboration and mutuality	Eisen (2001) identified a peer dynamic that reflects essential relational qualities including non-hierarchical status, non-evaluative feedback, and establishment of mutual goals (as cited in Taylor, 2008)
Empowerment, voice, and choice	Social-emancipatory: Develop student agency and share power with students (Freire & Macedo, 1995)
Cultural, historical, and gender contexts	“A race-centric view of transformative learning is culturally bounded, oppositional, and non-individualistic” (Williams, 2003 as cited in Taylor, 2008); A cultural-spiritual view is concerned with “connections between individuals and social structures...and notions of intersecting positionalities” (Tisdell, 2005 as cited in Taylor, 2008)
Resilience, growth, and change	Holistic approach: Recognizes the importance of relationships, “about inviting the whole person into the classroom environment” (Dirkx, 2006 as cited in Taylor, 2008)

Implementing TITL Prior to the Pandemic: Pre-Transformation

In our roles as adjunct faculty and full-time higher education administrators managing an online program, we were already using TITL practices in our own classrooms and training and mentoring faculty on the use of TITL practices as well (Marquart, Báez, & Garay, 2019; Marquart & Verdooner, 2019; Ortega, et al., 2018). This has been particularly important as educators in our specific discipline because in the field of social work, students and practitioners have often experienced higher rates of adverse childhood experiences and greater vicarious or secondary trauma than the general population (Butler, et al., 2018; Carello, 2018b; Didham et al., 2011; Dykes & Green, 2016; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015; Rubi, 2020; Steen, et al., 2020; Thomas, 2016).

However, social work students, similar to many other students, also have a “fairly high degree of resilience” (Wilks, 2008). Resilience is the degree to which one is able to overcome challenges and find meaning out of adversity (Masten & Reed, 2002). Along with resilience, research has found that individuals can be changed in radical ways through struggle and trauma in a process known as posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). In posttraumatic growth, individuals grow out of adversity from creating a greater appreciation of life to looking towards new possibilities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). And, recent innovative models of posttraumatic growth have included both individual and collective factors in building strength and adversity, especially with those who have been historically and currently targeted for ongoing systemic violence and discrimination based on racial and ethnic identity (Ortega-Williams et al., 2021). This has led us to ask ourselves and our colleagues: how are we as educators building resilience and wellbeing in our students to support their growth?

Transforming Our Approach

As a result of the pandemic, we both found that our use of TITL practices significantly increased, particularly our compassion, collaboration with students, and flexibility with assignment deadlines. At the same time, we have received increased interest from educators across disciplines seeking to learn to implement TITL practices (Báez, Carello, & Marquart 2020; Báez & Marquart, 2020; Marquart, Báez, & Florio, 2021).

Because of the collective trauma and distress of the pandemic, we gained a new perspective on a practice we already believed in—we reconceptualized TITL practices as much more fundamental to teaching, both now and in the long term. We reexamined when to offer deadline extensions for coursework and how much flexibility to offer, how to incorporate student feedback on assignment requirements while continuing to meet course objectives, how to intentionally demonstrate compassion in interactions with students, and how to balance competing interests and viewpoints in making decisions fairly.

Teaching and Transforming in a Pandemic: March–May, 2020, Matthea Marquart

My course's first day of class was March 10th, and the next day the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that we were in a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). We had the next week off due to spring break, so we had time to think before our second class on March 24th, and in the meantime our university made the decision that all spring semester courses would be graded pass/fail (Bollinger, 2020). The course instructional team consisted of myself as the instructor, a teaching associate, and a technical support specialist because the course was an online synchronous course, and every week we planned our response to the changing conditions of the pandemic together. After the course concluded, we wrote about the experience together (Marquart, Seibel, & Wong, 2020), and several months later, after the students had graduated, we reunited to write about the experience again with one of our former students (Marquart et al., 2021). Along with writing here with a fellow instructor, this has given me the opportunity to reflect on this pandemic teaching experience over time and from multiple perspectives, and I find my teaching permanently transformed.

During the first class session of this course, the agenda reflected my usual practices. During introductions, I shared that I see the course as the beginning of our relationship as social work colleagues, and that past students have stayed in touch for reasons such as letters of reference, career advice, or to meet up at conferences. The students shared their goals for the course and anything else they wanted the group to know. We created community agreements by asking students what agreements would be helpful in establishing a sense of professionalism, leadership, and respect, and what their hopes and dreams were for our classroom community. I shared my philosophy on teaching, including how the instructional team would support their learning by creating a positive learning environment, helping them make connections between their prior knowledge and experiences and new information, giving them opportunities to practice, integrate, apply, and reflect on their learning, and giving them timely, supportive feedback. I also shared my perspective on what grades mean in my courses; I said that they are neutral feedback on a student's performance on an assignment's requirements as indicated in the rubric, they are not a judgement on a student's value as a human being, they are intended to support learning by providing feedback on coursework, and every student would be treated with respect during the course and in the future regardless of their grades. For example, if there are points in a rubric for turning in an assignment on time, students can choose whether to forgo those points by turning in the assignment late, or they can contact me ahead of time for an extension with no lost points for lateness, and either way there are no judgements or criticisms of individuals for their choices. My team and I also introduced an idea we were piloting: one "self-care coupon" per student, which students could use to turn in any one discussion forum post up to one week late for any reason, which was an idea shared by a colleague on Twitter (Thompson, 2019). The assignments included choices, including choosing topics and dates for presentations, choosing which weekly reading to respond to in weekly discussion forums, and choosing topics and groups for the

final assignment. We gave students a chance to review the rubric for the final assignment and provide feedback to update it. We asked for feedback at the end of class, and students were positive about the rest of the course to come.

I felt pleased with the trauma-informed strategies my team and I had implemented, including beginning to build an atmosphere of respect and acceptance, clarifying course expectations, sharing power with students, giving students choices, and soliciting feedback from students to improve the course. These were also strategies that fit the framework of transformative learning theory. However, by the second class session, the world had changed. One of the principles of TITL is Cultural, Historical, and Gender Contexts, and living through the beginning of a pandemic together was certainly a significant shared historical context. This was a social crisis that impacted all of us and sparked reassessment and challenging of assumptions. Suddenly, the TITL strategies implemented in the course thus far appeared stingy in the face of the crisis, as the pandemic was a major life event for myself, my team, and my students, which caused us to adapt our course pedagogy. For example, giving students only one opportunity to turn in an assignment late was not enough flexibility, as deducting points for lateness seemed cruel. Emphasizing “professionalism” in the classroom seemed ridiculous. Grading assignments for a pass/fail course seemed like it would cause unnecessary stress. My team and I prepared a proposal for changes to the course, including making some assignments optional, grading some assignments as complete or incomplete, removing penalties for lateness, and simplifying the final assignment—all of this I shared with students during the second class as a starting point for discussion. With the students, we collectively decided on the final changes, and we also added to the community agreements that we would forgive each other because we were all going through a lot.

This experience challenged my commitment to TITL; I had previously felt satisfied with the strategies I was implementing, but teaching during the pandemic was a transformative experience that highlighted additional ways that I could commit to TITL principles. It caused me to reconceptualize what it means to meet student needs, and revisit tensions between competing ideas about teaching and learning, such as the tension between the idea that grades are an obstacle to learning (Stommel, 2017) and the idea that an important function of social work education is gatekeeping to protect clients from inadequate service providers (Sowbel & Miller, 2014). The pandemic is also highlighting social issues that impact education, including digital poverty, food and housing insecurity, disparate impacts of the pandemic on black and brown communities, and the struggles of students balancing caregiving, work, and other responsibilities with their coursework. In the wake of teaching during this period, I have recommitted to the belief that TITL is essential, and I continue to reflect on ways to go further with TITL strategies and to incorporate elements of transformative learning theory as well.

Teaching and Transforming in a Pandemic: May–July, 2020, Johanna Creswell Báez

I found myself continually transforming alongside my students, while teaching during the summer months in a pandemic. The class even started off different than other classes, as I took time to explain my worldview upfront with a focus on trauma-informed teaching and learning principles. Together, we went over the key principles of TITL; I talked about how my teaching works towards creating change and transformation, includes choices, integrates their voices and opinions, and holds the intersectionality of individual cultural, historical, and gender contexts, among other integrative and transformative approaches. We also examined the concepts of change and growth together and created our community agreements after discussing how we can support each other’s growth during a time of immense change. Students were really receptive; they liked that a one-page TITL overview that was shared and asked to share it with other professors. There was a sense of feeling grounded in a collective agreement with guiding principles, in a time when everything felt unpredictable.

My first area of major transformation was around deadlines and extensions with the first assignment in the class. Many students were reaching out with personal struggles and asking for an extension. I met their personal struggles with great compassion and reflected on my own personal struggles privately (e.g. balancing a child at home, a partner trying to finish a bachelor’s degree online,

dangerous protests against unjust anti-Black racism in our community, etc.). I decided to ask students during the next class session how we can hold the complexity of our own and collectively our classmates' real struggles of balancing life in a pandemic with school, while making more realistic requirements that still upheld our course objectives. The students agreed that extensions were helpful and that ultimately, it was about the students learning and completing objectives. I noted that we could transform with the TITL principles of support and trustworthiness, in giving all students the opportunity to submit their assignments up to a week late. And, if some students needed a bit longer, that could also be worked out with myself, the instructor. I have always viewed myself as flexible and focused on the learning over the grades. However, this felt like a great risk in transforming to be more flexible with deadlines. The students, on the other hand, seemed to not view this as a risk and focused more on the learning and supporting their classmates. The students modeled for me that updating our deadlines was a supportive frame change that made our class more inclusive. One student who I provided multiple extensions, actually did some of the best work on assignments and really needed these accommodations given the multitude of personal stressors going on in their life.

I have also been thinking about and including choices where possible with my assignments. This course included a paper about their families and I provided them multiple choices throughout the assignment, including they could choose four areas from a list of topics they would like to write about and removed topics that included trauma. I also said they could choose which family they would like to write about, as several students had chosen families both in the past through the foster care system and presently through their chosen life-partners. Through providing choices, my teaching became more inclusive and transformative. The student's papers were some of the most fantastic papers that I have read, including a student who ended up winning a local scholarship award for the paper on her family.

Similar to what was happening in our communities, our classroom also reflected the long-standing health and economic disparities in the United States, as my graduate students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and under-represented groups were reporting higher rates of anxiety and stress (Woolston, 2020). My students talked about their families and the families they were working with and how they were understandably exhausted from ongoing systemic violence and discrimination. We leaned into our collective strength to support our growth, by providing more mutual aid with each other (Ortega-Williams et al., 2021). We listened to our family stories of strength and struggle as students presented pictures of their families or chosen families (they were provided the choice). We rallied around each other during a summer of racial reckoning, where the United States was witness to continued horrendous violence and death towards Black Americans (Chang et al., 2020). Alongside the nation, our class talked about action we were taking in our local communities against anti-Black racism and provided support to those who were historically and currently being targeted based on their race and ethnic identity.

Continuing to Transform: Recommitting to TITL Beyond the Pandemic

As we continue to critically reflect on these experiences and continue to teach, we're discovering continued implications of our transformative recommitment to TITL. TITL principles are complementary to transformative learning theory and practice, as they both "move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience" (Mezirow, 1997). We encourage transformative learning theory practitioners to consider integrating TITL principles into their pedagogical practice, and hope that sharing our reflective experiences will create discourse within your learning communities. These practices are intertwined and beneficial in the long term for student learning, as traumas and emergencies will continue to occur beyond the pandemic. The current pandemic will have a long-term impact, and transformative learning theory, which seeks to integrate the whole student experience, may therefore benefit from the sustained integration of TITL practices.

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