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being able

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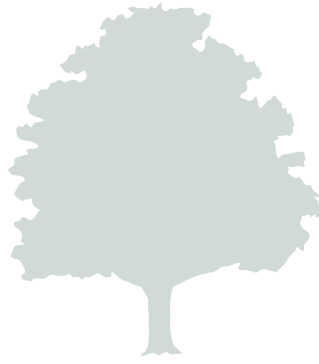
—Rebecca Balog, Virginia Commonwealth University, Adjunct Professor

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Supercharge Your Slide Deck for Student Learning

Jeremy A. Rentz

All the world's a stage—particularly your seated, online, or hybrid classroom, where slides can set the scene, provide drama, and sing backing vocals. Unfortunately, many faculty matriculated in an era when wordy, bullet-laden PowerPoints were abundant, and too often, we bring poor slides to our classrooms. For many, the stage set by our slides suffers from numerous pitfalls. Fortunately, impactful, student-focused slides can be generated or quickly modified by understanding and planning in three areas: subvocalization, cognitive load, and dual coding.

Subvocalization is that little voice in your head that you hear when you read text. Even as I write this article, I hear the words. Not everyone has an inner monologue, but in informal polling I have conducted in faculty development sessions and classes, more than 90 percent of faculty and students say they do. In the classroom, subvocalization has significant implications. Students will read every word you put on the slide and hear that voice within. If you are talking simultaneously, it will be hard for students to appreciate either voice fully. When slides are too wordy, we must make adjustments to ensure the slides act as good backup singers. It's not like students can shut off their inner monologue.

A “less is more” approach limits subvocalization issues, with no slides having more than 15 words. With the low word count on each slide, students can quickly read using their internal voice, and their minds will be clear when you begin adding details, stories, and examples to strengthen the slide's message. Critically, you must give students time to read each slide when you click on a new one. Subvocalization issues will persist if you talk continuously during transitions, even if your slide is well-designed. To limit slides to 15 words in practice, the “less is more” approach requires splitting wordy slides. One slide might become two, three, or four easily readable slides with an appropriate image or graphic to provide context or exploit dual coding—which we'll get to later.



Cognitive load is the next element to consider for slide construction. Cognitive load theory describes how brains work when learning or working on problems (Lovell, 2020). Our brains have a finite amount of working memory to dedicate to learning, split into three domains: intrinsic, extraneous, and germane. Intrinsic load is the working memory used to deal with the difficulty of the task at hand. Extraneous load represents the work the brain is doing to deal with internal and external distractions. Germane load describes the portion of working memory dedicated to the learning or problem solving we want to take place during class. The intrinsic load takes its share of the working memory first, the extraneous load takes its part second, and the germane load gets any remaining working memory. For those of you in difficult subject areas or with challenging units throughout the semester, less working memory will be available to students due to the high intrinsic load. Of course, it is essential to recognize that the intrinsic and extraneous loads may vary wildly from student to student in your classes.

Concerning slides, billboards are my inspiration for keeping cognitive load down. Even at 75 miles an hour, with a screaming kid, a barking dog, and a hangry partner, you can catch the number of the exit you need for a much-needed dinner stop. You only need two strategies to develop slides that function as billboards for distracted students: (1) one thought per slide and (2) good fonts.

All good billboards include just one thought to reduce the distracted driver's cognitive load. To maximize thinking in class (germane load), we must avoid complicated, full slides that increase students' intrinsic and extraneous loads. The one-thought-per-slide strategy ensures that students can wrap their heads around any new ideas presented. Remember, our students are novices in our subject areas, and they simply cannot process or deal with all the complex scenarios we have come to understand over many years of specialized training. What might feel easy to us can feel impossible to students.

The one-thought-per-slide approach requires splitting complex, complicated slides, just like the approach for subvocalization. One complex slide should become two, three, four, or more easily digestible slides with an appropriate image or graphic to provide context or exploit dual coding. In a few instances, I have turned one slide into seven or eight. The "one thought" could be a concept introduction or a summary, where multiple icons or simple graphics represent parts of the whole. When using an introductory slide, follow with one or more slides for each specific part.

And yes, I know what you are thinking: *My slide deck will be huge if I split wordy and complicated slides.* If your concern is file size, that is not an issue in the age of flash memory and the cloud. If your concern is the number of slides, no worries. Your new,



supercharged slides are simple to understand and easy for students to digest, so let go of tying the number of slides to the length of your class. Ultimately, you are explaining the same information you did previously but in a much easier-to-digest format. The simplicity of your new slides will help students understand things more quickly.

The second key to slides that function like billboards is choosing fonts carefully and avoiding decorative fonts. Sans serif fonts, the ones without the flourishes, work best. Like the billboards we are mimicking, street signs also use these fonts to ensure readability. I often use Ebrima in PowerPoint, but I prefer Google Slides, which has hundreds of sans-serif fonts available. Find your own font and make it part of your teaching brand.

The last element for slide development is **dual coding**, a true power-up for student learning, which takes advantage of our brains' dual processing power (Caviglioli, 2019). Though I'm oversimplifying, one channel in our brain processes graphics, images, pictures, and icons, while a second channel simultaneously processes text and spoken words. When the graphics and words are married together, the collective impact is greater than the two parts, a synergy. I try to exploit dual coding in every slide, and I urge you to utilize the strategy whenever you can. I use images, pictures, and diagrams to provide context for students, and I use a lot of icons to serve as visual hooks for students to hang new information. You can further amplify dual coding by developing handouts with key icons and images for students to make notes. The graphic next to their own words is likely even more potent than the dual coding on your slides.

When maximizing the power of dual coding and graphics, I address one of two questions for every slide. (1) Does the image or graphic provide the appropriate context for a novice learner in this class? (2) Does the icon, graphic, or picture provide an appropriate hook for students to hang information using dual coding? In these questions, "appropriate" means the image, graphic, or icon relates to or is of interest to the students in your current class. A lot of different tools are available to help you build supercharged slides. PowerPoint and Google Slides offer some icons, but [Noun Project](#) has everything you need. [Pixabay](#) and [Pexels](#) are great places to start for high-impact, royalty-free images.

As experts in our fields, it is easy for us to conjure images in our minds, but our students don't have our lived experience or context. Using multiple high-resolution pictures in various scenarios will help build student understanding by providing the context they need. This power to provide instant context is why I moved from handwritten notes to slides years ago. I could write all I wanted on the board, but the students still had no idea what a water treatment sedimentation basin looked like, hindering their basic understanding of the treatment processes. For teachers who primarily handwrite notes, a supercharged



slide deck also reduces student cognitive load associated with all the notes on the board and opens the door for many more dual coding opportunities.

Now that you know about subvocalization, cognitive load, and dual coding, don't try to swallow an elephant. Start your process to supercharged slides slowly and intentionally. First, check out the [slide deck](#) and the [handout](#) I used at the 2023 Teaching Professor Conference. Second, find *your* font. Third, split a few wordy or complicated slides. Fourth, try a little dual coding. With some practice, the forethought and skill needed to generate slides that aid student learning becomes second nature. Good luck on your adventure to supercharged slides.

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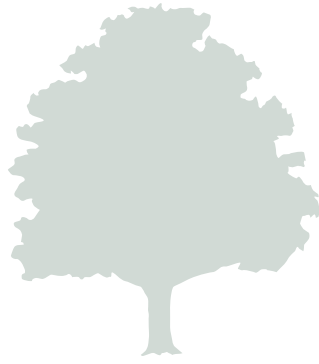


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Boosting Learning and Decreasing Stress through Intentional Course Design

Rob Eaton

When I began researching the impact of mental health challenges on student learning, one of my first steps was to interview a couple of friends from the counseling center on campus. I asked them what kinds of things faculty members did that might inadvertently exacerbate students' mental health issues. Without hesitation, they mentioned oral presentations.

This stung because I'd often required oral presentations in my general education courses—without any thought as to how they might affect the mental health of my students with anxiety. Perhaps that was because—not surprisingly for a professor—I had enjoyed doing oral presentations as a student myself. I simply hadn't given much thought to how students who were naturally more introverted or experienced higher levels of anxiety would experience such an assignment.

By assigning oral presentations, I had failed to be intentional in my course design. That is, I had failed to make choices deliberately, after weighing costs, benefits, and consequences. In *Improving Learning and Teaching in the College Classroom*, Steve Hunsaker, Bonnie Moon, and I propose what you might call a formula for intentionality in the context of mental health—questions to guide an analysis of the pedagogical benefits and mental health costs of our course design and teaching choices. We suggest considering these four questions:

1. What is the impact of this practice on students with mental health challenges?
2. How central is it to my course outcomes?



3. Are there any less agitating alternatives that could achieve the same outcomes equally well or even better?
4. If not, are there some ways to knock off the rough edges of this practice?

In the case of oral presentations, my problem was that I had never considered the impact of requiring every student to stand before the entire class to give a presentation, regardless of their major, their circumstances, or their preferences. Nor was the practice particularly aligned with any of my outcomes in these courses, let alone central to them. Because I hadn't considered the first two questions, it had not occurred to me to entertain alternatives—such as giving students multiple options for completing an assignment whose main purpose was just to develop and articulate a bit of expertise.

If I were really set on helping students cultivate oral communication skills in my course, I could have contemplated modifications that would still have required students to speak without necessarily having to do so live in front of the entire class. For example, some colleagues in one of the courses I taught stumbled on an alternative that undoubtedly

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decreased stress for many students—even though they weren't even thinking of the mental health impacts of this assignment. Looking for ways to free up some valuable class time, they chose to have students record themselves narrating a slideshow of their presentation and then watch each other's presentations outside of class, rather than have them present to the entire class. The result? When students could record their presentations multiple times in the privacy of their room, the quality of the presentations went up, even as stress levels almost certainly went down.

Intentionality in course design has always been important, but the stakes are even higher as we find ourselves in what a 2021 US Surgeon General's Advisory called "a mental health pandemic" for teenagers and young adults (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021, p. 40). Steve, Bonnie, and I argue that if we are simply more intentional in the ways we design our courses and teach our students, we can simultaneously boost learning and decrease unnecessary student stress and discouragement that can lead to anxiety and depression. Designing courses with mental health impacts in mind can help create a college experience for our students that stretches their minds without crushing their souls.

We have examined a variety of course design decisions that can boost learning and decrease stress, including telegraphing flexibility in the syllabus, reconsidering draconian late policies, chunking assignments into smaller pieces, promoting more mastery learning, increasing student choice, and eliminating most timed tests. Here, I elaborate on just one strategy: simplifying course design.

I once revised one of my courses and was proud of how it was now laced with a variety of authentic, real-world learning experiences. But when I asked my teaching assistant for some feedback, she surprised me with this candid, incisive observation: "Too many moving parts."

When we conducted focus groups with students with mental health challenges, several students talked about just how much this aspect of course design mattered to them. The simpler and more organized the course layout was—and the easier it was to navigate in the learning management system—the less they experienced what psychologists call *extraneous load*.

Susan Ambrose and her colleagues (2010, p. 106) describe extraneous load as "aspects of a task that make it difficult to complete but that are unrelated to what students need to learn." The notion of underlying extraneous load is essentially that cognition is a zero-sum game, so every task that requires us to focus our intellectual efforts on one thing comes at the expense of being able to more fully focus on something else.



Consequently, simplicity in course design frees up students to use their cognitive capacity on the target learning activity rather than on navigating the course and juggling deadlines.

It's possible to create such simplicity without sacrificing academic rigor. For example, in my course with too many moving parts—multiple assignments with deadlines scattered throughout the semester with no discernible pattern—I converted those assignments into a single assignment: the weekly experiential learning assignment. Now students do a different kind of hands-on assignment each week of the semester while having to remember only that they have some kind of hands-on assignment due every Saturday night.

It was as if I'd been asking students to memorize a chain that included 48 letters arranged in a seemingly random way: *ssertsyrasseccennusecuderngisedesruocniyticilpmis*. That task seems nearly impossible. But students can memorize those exact same letters quite easily if I simply reverse the order and add a few spaces: *simplicity in course design reduces unnecessary stress*.

Ironically, simplifying my course organization in this way has also led me to some unanticipated improvements in what was once a series of unrelated assignments. Drawing on the four components of the experiential learning cycle, I now use the same template for each of the assignments. As I focused on the unifying thread of experiential learning that ran through my assignments and learned more about that kind of learning activity, I developed a consistent approach to those assignments, one based on the four components of the experiential learning cycle.

Every week, students see the same diagram of the experiential learning cycle and read the same introduction:

Each week, you'll get the opportunity to learn in a hands-on way. But experts on experiential learning teach us that experience alone isn't enough. We learn even more when we reflect on our experience and think about it in a way that lets us glean lessons we can apply more broadly. When we then act and experiment on the lessons we've learned from our experience, it becomes a virtuous cycle of learning. So each week, you will not only do something but reflect on and write about what you have learned.

Now, in addition to having the same experiences they had before, my students understand that we learn more from our experiences in life when we process them, look for broadly applicable lessons, and act on our insights going forward.

Incidentally, such a discovery highlights a key finding of the work that Steve, Bonnie, and I have done: we don't have to sacrifice true academic rigor to make life better for our



students with mental health challenges. We're fans of what Robert Bjork calls *desirable difficulties* in the learning process. But as Bjork himself acknowledges, not all difficulties we create for our students are desirable (LastingLearning.com, 2015). And when we are intentional, we can often discover modifications that not only reduce undesirable difficulties—especially for students coping with anxiety or depression—but actually lead to more learning for all our students.

In sum, a dose of intentionality in the way we design courses can be great preventive medicine in the battle against the mental health pandemic in which so many of our students find themselves. By designing our courses with our students' wellness in mind, we can find ways to simultaneously reduce unnecessary stress and discouragement *and* boost learning for all our students.

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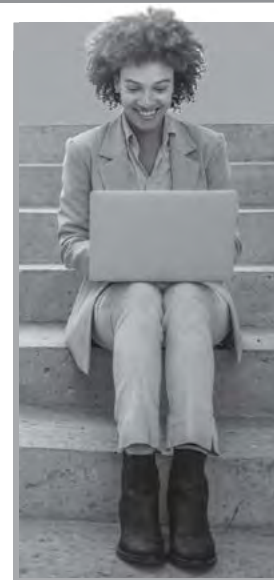
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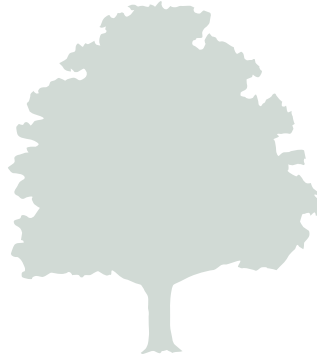


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Improve Critical Thinking in the Clinical Learning Environment

Staci Saner, Russ Farmer, and Gerard P. Rabalais

Movements in education may come and go; however, the competency movement in health professions education (HPE) has been here for over 20 years. The governing organizations that rule HPE have been implementing competency-based strategies—milestones, entrustable professional activities (EPAs), and core competencies—with increasing frequency. Each new academic cycle sees a novel set of tools and rules to govern how HPE teachers instruct. What goes unspoken, and even more horribly, unknown or unnoticed is the single governing competency that gets the entirety of these learning paradigms with one single concept: critical thinking. To think critically results in automatic inclusion of all competencies. If one can think critically at all junction moments of care delivery and receipt of new knowledge, one takes the best possible care of the patient by default. Critical thinking allows one to learn the best tools and implement them correctly. Critical thinking is the ultimate panacea in the treatment of disease by healthcare providers and a cure for ignorance by health professions educators.

While the most important concept and skill, critical thinking remains elusive to teach. **How do you teach someone to think?** Not just to think, but to think *better*. Not just better, but more deeply and on levels that they are not used to. A key component of this form of education relies on using strategic questions with a focus on higher-order thinking skills. Strategic questions are ones designed to provoke specific levels of thought at specific times for learners. Higher-order thinking skills include those verbs familiar to many educators as existing at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy—*create*, *evaluate*, and *analyze*, among others. Most questions asked of learners in HPE settings are almost exclusively limited to remembering facts—and, perhaps, understanding how two facts relate



to each other. To have learners build the capacity for critical thinking, they must engage repeatedly with this type of questioning with an understanding and patient mentor.

The issue arises with the current clinical learning environment. **It is chaos distilled.** Pagers explode. Phone calls ring endlessly. Patients have been waiting for hours. The world seems to spin faster than in any other portion of a learner's life. The instructor is likewise pulled in many directions at once. As the embodiment of care and knowledge, the instructor carries the burden of teaching multiple levels of learners at once, from junior learner to experienced clinician. They must do this with often no formal training in education beyond what they themselves experienced as learners. All the while, patients must be kept happy, medications prescribed, bills collected, and most importantly, the almighty electronic medical record maintained. How is a teacher in HPE supposed to teach all these various groups of people with no time and no training?

Our group has devised a method to empower clinical educators of all kinds to teach critical thinking skills with minimal experience in formal didactics and minimal hands-on training. This method comes in the form of a specific tool—a pocket device that is the QARRD (Farmer et al., 2021). This pocket reference combines several different aspects of strategic questioning for HPE teachers into a single source: Bloom's verbs for higher-order thinking, questioning strategies common for HPE learners with examples, and elaboration questions, such as "What if?" Our accompanying workshop demonstrates the methods of using the QARRD as a playbook to get learners thinking critically. For example, the use of verbs from the apex of Bloom's Taxonomy generates critical thinking questions—for example, "Design for a me a method of ensuring that the patients you have seen as part of postpartum nursing rounds can minimize their risk for peripartum fever." Asking a question of this type requires learners to apply their knowledge in creative ways that are appropriate to clinical situations.

A chief benefit of the QARRD is its ability to be "subcortical." The questions contained therein may be asked of learners of many levels, often pairing more junior learners with lower Bloom's levels (like Remember). More advanced learners get more advanced questions. To minimize cortical demand on busy clinicians, the questions can be read straight from the QARRD. The scenarios we have generated are common ones to be found as part of many medical learning experiences, such that educators in the health professions will encounter them and find it easy to incorporate these forms of questions into their teaching practice. Ideally, teachers will begin to develop their own questions based on the series of Bloom's verbs presented in the QARRD as they get more familiar with this questioning format.



Interestingly, the questioning methods present within the QARRD are discipline neutral; the questioner can create questions that stimulate critical thinking independent of their familiarity with the subject matter to be understood. As instructors, we can ask (and have asked) questions unrelated to our areas of practice. Working through the answers with learners not only sparks their critical thinking skills but allows us to model our own experienced critical thinking in the patient care arena. The questioning methods and concepts are not exclusive to HPE. The concept of generating higher-order thinking questions applies to all disciplines. One can just as easily use the QARRD tools in engineering or business application.

Words of caution are necessary. Learners will have difficulty with this form of questioning at the start. They will grasp for answers as they have previously been asked only lower-order questions. They will need to be counseled that the questions they are about to receive cover more difficult topics and will take much longer to answer. In this respect, support from mentors is key. Educators also need to be graceful with themselves as asking these sorts of questions will not come naturally. The HPE world has existed for so long in the morass of poor, lower-order questions that questions intent on critical thinking will seem odd to educators' ears. Give yourself time to learn how to ask these questions and start small. Instruct your learners as to why you are asking these questions. Best practices even show learners how to use the QARRD for themselves, without the need for mentor prompting.

Critical thinking is the meta-competency in healthcare education. It gets everything that every educational accrediting body is always after. If you have a critical thinker, you have the best person to care for your family and yourself. They will always do what is needed because they are not only competent to care for you; they are also ready.

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**"Variety of topics and direct application of the information.
I recommend it all the time."**

—Cheryl Ford-Smith, Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University

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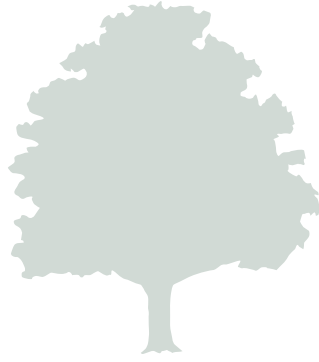
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Are You Seeking Student Engagement . . . or Obedience?

Sarah Rutherford

Lately, my favorite days in class have been the rowdy ones. If someone asks me how my classes are going, I can say with genuine happiness, “Great! They were so rowdy today.” What I’m recalling in that moment is a picture of students completely engaged in whatever activity we’re doing, talking with true excitement, creating a din so loud I have to try several times to get their attention (apologies to my colleagues nearby who have had to shut their doors). I’ve been teaching for over a decade and might enjoy being in the classroom now more than I ever have. That I’m having so much fun post-emergency remote teaching is, I think, unusual. Beyond having tenure (which provides an undeniable foundation of security), the biggest contributing factors are my efforts to examine and then loosen the power I hold in the classroom.

One of the fallacies of learning students believe is that learning happens with a feeling of ease. Behaviors that seem effortless to them count as learning. Because learning should feel good, right? What about struggling to understand a complex topic? For most students: not learning. Getting an A after some all-night cramming? Learning. Sitting in class and paying attention (or looking like they are)? Learning. Having trouble with a software function and watching tutorials to figure it out? Not learning.

Is it possible that we as instructors are reinforcing these mistaken beliefs?

Instructors spend a lot of time and energy outlining what students should or shouldn’t do in class. Think about how much of your syllabus is devoted to policies compared to how much there is about good learning behaviors. I do not advocate for wholly removing guidelines and policies that govern the classroom. Students expect us to set up the structure of the course. But if we spend the first day or two of the semester going over the



syllabus, which contains a lot of policies or instructions, we've signaled that the important parts of the class are those that deal with how to behave, not with how to learn and engage with the content of the course.

Think about how students demonstrate engagement in your classes. After emergency remote teaching, just seeing students show up to class feels like a win for many of us. But you might also be picturing students facing forward, listening, making eye contact, sitting still, taking notes, or being respectful. Now consider how many of these behaviors are also demonstrations of obedience. Before addressing the disengagement problem, we must ask, "When I look to address student engagement, am I seeking to address obedience or learning?"

The more we communicate all the things that fall under our authority in the classroom, the more comfort students feel with ceding increasing control to us. Through our syllabus and assignments, we directly communicate what we control related to the curriculum, policies, consequences, and grades for the course. Because we're teaching within the inherited structure of higher education that carries its own silent norms and expectations, we're also indirectly communicating that we control the classroom space, including students' language and behaviors. If students see that we control so much of how they operate in the classroom, is it surprising that they might believe we're responsible for everything that happens within its sphere? They might also think we own their motivation, engagement, and learning.

Disengagement feels demoralizing. After putting effort into my curriculum, assignments, and even classroom presence, seeing students on their phones, sleeping, or not participating (or not seeing them at all) has certainly dented my ego. To address the problem, I tweaked policies and adopted new teaching methods, but I wasn't seeing the changes I wanted. That is until I started looking inward first, using a framework called critical pedagogy. By using a critical lens to evaluate and reflect on our teaching, we can uncover how social or institutional structures, assumptions, and unconscious bias are affecting our classroom and students. In *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, Stephen Brookfield presents four lenses of critical reflection: self, students, theory, and colleagues (Brookfield, 2017). The easiest ways to start are by consulting literature on teaching (theory) and examining ourselves.

Introspection alone is not what makes reflection on teaching critical. Like most instructors interested in pedagogical practice, I've been thinking and reading about teaching for years. My critical reflection began when I started examining how my power and biases relate to and are influenced by *structural* power and *structural* biases. While I make my



own choices about my classes, I'm still tapping into inherited power structures. The structures of power in higher education uphold whiteness, patriarchy, and paternalism. (While it might be easier to see in academic leadership, these values are present in the classroom as well—for example, when curriculum is based on mostly white perspectives, when groups assume a woman will take on duties like coordination and note-taking, and when instructors make decisions without student input because they “know better.”) Countering these forces on an individual level is an ongoing process. Through reading and reflection on power, I found a place to act. I saw that I was more focused on students not doing what I wanted them to (obeying me) than true transformation.

Banishing the mindset of obedience from the classroom can open doors to student autonomy. It is more difficult for students to hide behind compliance if they must evaluate what they are learning, how the class is governed, or how they are assessed. Creating ways for students to find autonomy in aspects of a course the instructor might normally control can encourage students to take responsibility for their engagement and learning. In the process of critically evaluating my teaching to improve classroom disengagement, I've successfully experimented with several methods of sharing classroom power. Two of my favorites are incorporating active learning methods and adopting ungrading.

Active learning involves instruction or activities where students are experientially involved in the learning process. It can involve thinking, discussing, writing, creating, or physical action. If you typically rely on lecture, consider integrating opportunities for students to engage in metacognitive thinking about the “why” behind course content; to think, discuss, or share how they will use or apply the content; or presenting questions or problems where students have to draw their own conclusions instead of being handed information.

Ungrading, or going gradeless, involves rejecting the subjective or punitive aspects of traditional grading. There are many approaches to ungrading, and because few schools would allow faculty to skip final grade submissions, nearly all of them result in an overall grade for the course. The difference is that students have a choice in their grade, typically based on how much work they want to take on. Among the many arguments for going gradeless, the most convincing for me is one of the simplest: grades do not track or demonstrate learning (Kohn, 2013). Every argument for traditional grading withers against the reality that we cannot really use a student's grade to determine what they have or have not learned. And if learning really is the most important thing in our classroom, shouldn't we use every means we can to prioritize it?



If your students are engaging in frustrating behaviors, it's okay to be frustrated by them. But I would caution against wallowing in this frustration or blaming students for everything going on in your classroom that you don't like. Instructors and students exist within a higher education system marked by inequitable structural power. Starting with critical examination of ourselves and our teaching is one way for instructors to confront the stasis that confines us all. Examining and challenging how we hold power in the classroom can create entry points for students to find more autonomy and engagement. Students who feel in control of what and how they are learning will display the engaged behaviors we're all so hungry for: attending class, doing their homework, speaking up, or supporting their peers. And they might even get a little rowdy.

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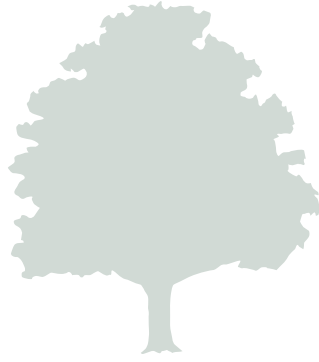
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Fostering Inclusion through Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Karen L. Gordes and Mary Jo Bondy

It started like any other day—alarm goes off, grab phone, begin reading Apple news—but then I came across this quote, this sobering and gut-wrenching quote in a *Washington Post* article from a student at Michigan State: “We are the mass shooting generation—we have generational trauma where we learn about the ABCs and then we learn about how to run from a gunman.” My heart sank, then I paused and thought, *This is a student that could be in my classroom. Am I prepared as an educator to support the learning of this student in the wake of their traumatic experience?* I shared these thoughts with my trusted colleague, we reflected on the predisposition to teach as you were taught, and how we were taught by example to suppress emotion and just move on. We questioned, there must be a better way to move forward, thereafter, fueling the beginning of our exploration into trauma-informed pedagogy.

Our students do not come to higher education with a clean slate. Many have experienced trauma. In fact, a significant portion of our student body will have experienced trauma within their educational lifespan. Studies indicate that 66–85 percent of college students report exposure to at least one traumatic event, and 50 percent of students report exposure to a traumatic event within the first year of college (Thompson & Carello, 2022).

So, what exactly is trauma? As the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) defines it, “Trauma is an experienced event or series of events (resulting in physical, emotional, and/or life-threatening harm) with lasting effects on a person’s mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” The types of traumas our students experience are vast, ranging from abuse, poverty, neglect, and loss to oppression, marginalization, violence, and pandemics. As we become more aware of the prevalence of trauma in our communities, an important recognition is that how someone responds to a traumatic experience is personal and shaped by their sociocultural beliefs, developmental stage, and access to resources and social supports (SAMHSA).



Once the realization of the pervasiveness of trauma in our student body sinks in, it's impossible to not leap to the question of how these experiences affect our students' ability to learn. Fortunately, there is a body of neuroscience work to address this question. To avoid digressing into a lengthy and exhaustive account of the neuroscience literature, let's just say that learning from a neuroscience perspective is essentially the forming and strengthening of neural connections. Stimuli that enhance the brain's ability to generate and strengthen neural connections will foster learning, while stimuli that impede neural connections will limit learning capacity. In the trauma-impacted brain, the amygdala (the part that controls emotion and aggression) becomes overactive, resulting in the generation of fewer neural connections within the prefrontal cortex, making it difficult for this area to manage complex functions, reasoning, problem solving, and emotional regulation (Schunk, 2020). The stress hormones released when the amygdala is active or overactive also reduce the ability of the hippocampus to generate new neurons, impairing the hippocampus's ability to create, store, and retrieve memories (Schunk).

For me, the simplest way to establish an understanding of how trauma can hinder learning is to draw on the collective experience of the recent pandemic. Think back on your own experiences during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. Did you find it difficult to focus, process information, or remember new content? This is because your flight, fight, or freeze response, an instinctual physiological response designed to support the body in response to a threatening situation by activating only systems crucial to survival, was partially or fully blocking your prefrontal cortex activity.

Getting back to the personal nature of trauma: while no one was untouched by the events surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, not everyone experienced the pandemic in the same way. Experiences varied according to access to resources and social supports, degree and frequency of threat exposure, and sociocultural factors, and as a result the long-lasting adverse effects of the pandemic are also individualized.

It can be heavy to dig deep into the trauma literature. You might ask yourself, Is all lost? Is there a way forward for students affected by trauma to effectively learn? Am I equipped to address these students' needs as a faculty member? What resources or tools do I need to help me help my students?

A good starting point is to construct learning environments reflective of the key assumptions and principles of SAMSHA's trauma-informed approach (pp. 9–11), which happens to be congruent with the educational practices of social-emotional learning, Universal Design for Learning, inclusive pedagogy, and anti-oppressive practices. The four key assumptions—the four Rs—include realizing that trauma exists; recognizing the signs of



trauma; responding by having practices, policies, and procedures in place to respond to trauma; and resisting retraumatization. Accompanying these assumptions are six principles to guide practices, policies, and procedures in a trauma-informed manner:

- **Safety**—ensuring emotional, cognitive, physical, and interpersonal safety for your learners, this principle provides a foundation for healing for trauma survivors
- **Trustworthiness and transparency**—creating an environment where operations and decisions are conducted with transparency to build and maintain trust
- **Support and connection**—building mutual, healing, relationships among peers and providing space for trauma survivors to grow their resilience
- **Collaboration and mutuality**—developing a coalition that shares power and decision making
- **Empowerment, voice, and choice**—amplifying the voices of all learners and creating spaces for self-advocacy and advocacy of others
- **Cultural, history, and gender issues**—recognizing how the intersection of experiences shapes the learners we are working with

While we acknowledge that we cannot prevent every trauma, we believe we can help others withstand, recover from, and see past prior experiences through trauma-resilient teaching grounded in the six guiding principles. We advocate for an approach that is strengths based, person centered, and solutions focused—all of which are critical for fostering an effective learning environment.

Here are four broad questions you can ask yourself to self-evaluate on whether you are creating and delivering educational course content reflective of the six principles:

1. Are you transparent about your course operations and decisions, and have you created a predictable and consistent learning environment? Uncertainty and ambiguity can generate a fear state in trauma survivors; creating transparency and predictability is an effective means to support learners affected by trauma.
2. Do you engage in shared power and decision making? From an inclusion perspective, this requires building in mechanisms to disrupt power differentials and creates an environment of “we are in this together.”
3. Do you build choice into your course? Choice creates a culture of empowerment, whereby all individuals see their needs as having value.



4. Do you ensure content reflects a diversity of learners? Incorporating course materials from and about diverse groups recognizes the complexity of academic needs and interests of learners.

The four Rs and six principles generated by SAMHSA provide a strong foundation for a trauma-informed educational approach and can guide our teaching and learning practices. We will see trauma survivors in our classrooms. A trauma-informed pedagogical framework provides consideration for how our teaching and learning practices can either challenge or facilitate success in learners who have experienced trauma. If inclusion is our goal, then we must transform our educational spaces to support these learners.

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