



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Trauma-Informed Pedagogy Begins with Educators

M. Wolff, *Augustana College* | Stacy Williams, *McCormick Theological Seminary*

Blog Series: Uncategorized | Embodied Teaching

February 06, 2023

Tags: pedagogy | trauma | stress | disrupt

Your PowerPoint slides are not projecting on the screen as students trickle into the classroom. Normally you like to have everything prepared before their arrival, but ITS is not responding to your calls. Running on coffee and a few hours of sleep you begin the lecture only to be interrupted by late students. Pushing your hospitalized parent out of your mind, you continue with the lecture thinking that *you* never would have disrespected your professors this way. A student in the front row is nodding off to sleep. You made it to class early after dropping kids who were screaming for your attention, with runny noses, off at daycare. An “A” student catches your eye. They are diligently taking notes despite having pulled an all-nighter.

It is a scene all too familiar to educators. We check our bodies and emotions at the door and wonder why students don’t also. Our advisors and mentors taught us to be disciplined. Prioritize your research and writing in order to succeed. The life of the mind is built upon

outsourcing the mundane things like cooking and cleaning to someone else.

Students who prioritize learning information to the neglect of their health are rewarded within the status quo. When they compartmentalize their learning from the messiness of life, it is a relief to the educator. They focus on ideas rather than responsibilities to community. Conversely, students overcome by malnutrition, lack of resources, and abuse are punished. They face negative consequences for prioritizing caregiving over self-care.

The message is clear: students who are overcome by contexts beyond their control or extenuating conditions are left to “figure it out” as an acceptable pedagogical tool of disciplined thinking.

We as educators often assume that the process of learning is *for* the students, and our job is to deliver content. We use words like “rigor” and “grit” to put the onus on students to persevere through the stresses of learning. Those who don’t succeed presumably were not worthy.

But what if we as educators are the problem?

Unhealed trauma certainly inhibits student learning, but, perhaps more to the point, the unhealed trauma of educators perpetuates harm in the classroom. What might trauma-informed pedagogy look like?

Stacy Williams explains that trauma is not defined by events, but by the lingering effects on our brains and bodies. People can experience the same event and some seem to emerge unscathed, while others may be left struggling to return to their daily routine. *This explains the differing levels of impact upon communities with shared experiences and divergent effects.* Rather than adjudicate whether the student’s distress is reasonable (the loss of a pet, end of a romance, hunger, discrimination, etc.), we would do better to model teaching and learning as embodied and contextual.

We (the authors) suggest that as educators, one of the best things that we can do to improve pedagogy is to attend to our own bodies and emotions. With this baseline in mind, we can begin to unpack the experience of the professor described above. Perhaps the late student was also visiting a loved one in the hospital, the sleeping student might have also been up most of the night with a sick toddler, and many students have missed breakfast.

Paying attention to our own needs influences how we hold the learning space. Stress and trauma disrupt the students’ ability to learn, but they also disrupt educators’ ability to teach. The lingering effects of stress and trauma show up in the brain and body faster than logic and reason can process and remain in the body systems much longer than people realize.

Which professors and mentors reminded you to attend to your wounds? If they didn’t, what are the lingering effects? In order to avoid retraumatizing others, initiate self-awareness and get curious about the behaviors of your students.

Here are a few questions we propose to get you started:

- When did I last eat a nutritious meal and drink a full glass of water?
- Do I need to go outside for some movement?
- Who have I deeply connected with this week?

In short: what do you need today to be the best version of yourself to show up for others? Attentiveness to your bodily and emotional needs sets the tone for trauma-informed teaching and learning.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2023/02/trauma-informed-pedagogy-begins-with-educators/>