



## Thinking through drawing: an arts-based approach to trauma-informed pedagogy

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### ***Abstract***

In this short paper, we explore the use of arts-based approaches in a trauma-informed pedagogy workshop for arts and humanities-based staff and students. For the workshops, we wanted to create a space for conversation to flow around the discussion of trauma in teaching and learning spaces, but one that was different to the 'normal' training workshop. By exploring mark-making and the free use of space inspired by the concept of 'taking a line for a walk', facilitators were able to explore difficult conversations in the classroom from the perspectives of both teaching staff and students, enabling participants to anonymously map their emotions and approaches while teaching or encountering moments of discomfort, challenging emotions, or trauma. We encourage colleagues to explore the possibilities of arts pedagogy to develop trauma-informed teaching.

**Keywords:** trauma-informed; arts-based; workshops; trauma; pedagogy.

Movable whiteboards lined with poster paper. Piles of coloured dots, ready to be stuck down. A rainbow of coloured pens to make handprints. When we designed the environment of our first workshop exploring the handling of difficult classroom experiences, we knew our arts-led methodologies would be both exciting and challenging for participants offering different ways of exploring encounters with trauma in the higher education (HE) classroom.

We chose our approach because the physical act of drawing and mark-making echoes the embodied nature of trauma – every mark is different, but every mark has meaning. Drawing allows freethinking, in which ways of looking are not exclusive to any discipline (Phipps, 2006). Unique outcomes are developed at different stages as participants explore individual lines (both literal and figurative) of enquiry (MacLellan, 2017). This practice-led research approach employed methodologies familiar to art-and-craft practitioners including making space for conversation and allowing for non-verbal communication and self as well as collective reflection (Haseman, 2019).

We have a shared interest in accessible and inclusive practice and recognise that a trauma-informed approach ties to wider social justice concerns in academia (see Carter, 2015; Burton, 2021; De Welde, 2022). A trauma-informed approach to teaching, at its simplest level, is a universal approach which accepts the potential for those living with trauma to be in our teaching spaces, and seeks to develop teaching practices which include an understanding of how trauma can shape our lives (see Carello and Butler, 2014, among others). Importantly, these practices should be developed without needing students to disclose, recognising that they may not be wholly aware of the traumas they carry. It does not require deep, therapeutic-level knowledge, but draws on a will towards inclusion and compassion. It can be difficult to predict how sensitive and difficult topics in the classroom will affect both students and educators, particularly given that not only is the impact on staff under-researched (Goode, 2023) but that staff are both under-prepared and over-burdened *already*.

Our project began with discussions around how we could make spaces to engage in discomfiting and uncomfortable learning (Carter, 2015), which could include traumatic topics, but could also include how others' distress or trauma response impacts student learning and experience. For staff with no training in trauma, and who might have never considered what they research and teach as *traumatic*, it can often be hard to know what to do when students report or show distress. These sensitive and potentially taboo materials may even form a fundamental part of delivered content. How then, can we balance the need to care for students (and ourselves) with the understanding that learning can involve topics that are difficult and challenging?

**Figure 1. Attendance recording, one of the authors draws around her hand on a piece of paper.**

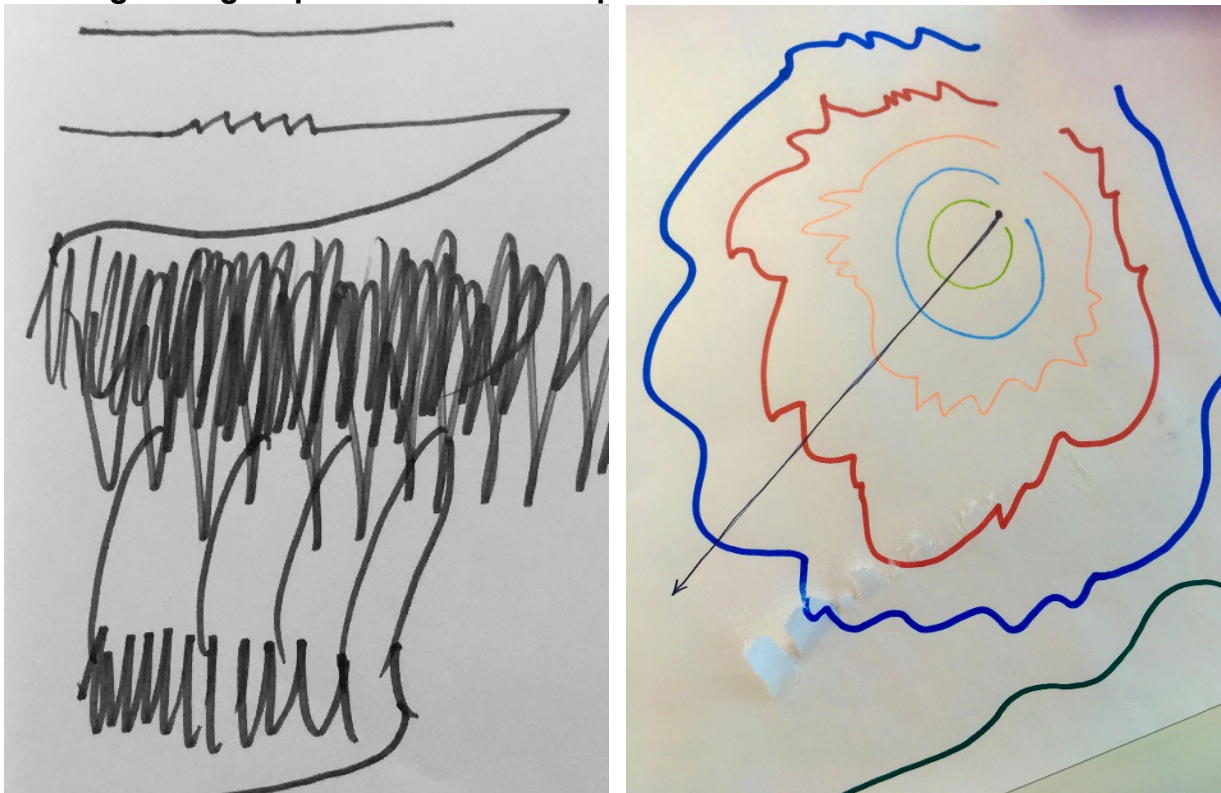


Our arts-led workshop was straightforward. We took a deliberately small approach, to leave space for the conversations to take place. We invited staff, and a mix of undergraduate and taught masters students to participate (nobody was coerced into attending, unless the promise of biscuits counts). Student and staff workshops were run separately, but the content and approach taken was the same. Our first step was for workshop participants to get comfortable with drawing: we asked each of them to record their attendance semi-anonymously, by drawing an outline of their hand on a shared sheet of paper, with the pen colour corresponding to their subject area (see Figure 1). This generated initial engagement with material thinking and represented an individual arrival into the artistic and reflective space (MacLellan, 2017, Bolt, 2019)

We invited participants to reflect on a time when they found classroom material upsetting or traumatic, or when they perceived someone else in the room did. We then invited participants to self-select drawing surfaces and mark-making tools and to make a line which represented their experience. The line was to represent how they felt before, during,

and after that experience, with the (repeated) caveat that there were no right or wrong feelings, and thus no right or wrong mark to make. Our practice was inspired by Paul Klee's 'taking a line for a walk' work (Eggelhöfer et al., 2020), where the line itself represents a journey, whether emotional or physical. We have included two examples (with permission) from participants below (see Figures 2 and 3).

**Figures 2 and 3. Line drawings produced by participants which illustrate them thinking through a previous difficult experience in the classroom.**



We immediately observed a difference in engagement. Whilst some participants loved the freedom to create and ran with it, others found the lack of boundaries troubling; they really wanted to add extensive written justifications for their lines rather than letting the shapes speak for themselves. Colleagues who wish to adopt these practices should remind themselves that both approaches have equal merit. The key aim is to offer freedom for participants to make sense of their experiences in the way that is most useful for them. Drawing enables multiple ways of responding to and making sense of experiences, enabling participants to lead their learning with more autonomy (MacLellan, 2017).

We observed that the haptic approach of our arts-led practices offered participants ways to think about a complex topic in broader and more lateral terms (Bolt, 2019). We asked workshop participants to reflect on their emotional experience and discuss it with others, if

they so wished. While we expected staff to reflect on their students' distress, it was notable that some also reflected on their own experiences of distress, not only as academic staff but as students in their own right. Students also reflected on their peers' experiences. By focusing on mark-making and the interaction of hands and pens and paper, each participant was able to create their individual narrative without fumbling over words or potential offence.

Centring our workshops on reflection acknowledges that there is often little or no time for this (Lynch and Glass, 2020), Drawing offers space for thinking; this practice-led approach opens up conversations that are free-flowing and affords quiet space for more considered thought.

We built on experiences gathered in the workshop to create a set of fictional scenarios which teaching colleagues then used to explore 'what-if' teaching activities and outline ways they might react to moments of unexpected trauma in the classroom. The workshops themselves were a valuable space to start conversations and to inform next steps. We were also empowered as facilitators to draw on our own practitioner experiences as makers, artists and material thinkers and to see these as powerful and legitimate additions to our pedagogical practices.

If you believe this would add value, we encourage you to search out spaces (physically and in the curriculum) and try it out. All you need is something to make marks with and on!

## ***Acknowledgements***

The authors would like to acknowledge the engagement of our colleagues and students who participated in workshops and shared their experiences, and to thank colleagues for supporting our work. Thanks are also due to the reviewers who helped shape this paper. Our cats did not help, but they assisted in the writing nonetheless.

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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