



Trauma-informed human rights teaching in higher education

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Abstract

In higher education environments, there is a high probability that some learners will have lived experience of conflict, violence, terrorism, forced exile, climate-related natural disasters and other significant human rights events. Human rights education (HRE) typically engages learners with these and many other complex and emotionally challenging topics. Educators are generally aware of the risk that engaging with these topics in the human rights curriculum may elicit trauma responses from learners, but they may not be as acutely aware of the risks of vicarious or secondary trauma to both learners and educators from such engagement, or of how trauma-informed teaching practice can help to mitigate those risks. This article examines pedagogical approaches that can guide educators through creative, conscious adoption of trauma-informed practice in their human rights teaching. These approaches invite educators to undergo a process of clarifying their own values and articulating their teaching personas, align content design with trauma-informed principles and the UN's 'learning *about, through* and *for*' framework for holistic human rights education, and embed opportunities in session design for dialogic engagement and structured reflection as a tool for self-understanding, self-empathy and resilience building.

Keywords: trauma-informed education; human rights education; teaching human rights.

Introduction

Human rights education and training (HRE) is woven into every stage of the lifelong learning journey of the individual, from primary and secondary school (Struthers, 2016) to tertiary and postgraduate/vocational education and beyond (Kaur and Harris, 2024). Although Human Rights is widely offered as an elective module in most universities, it is

still largely siloed as a law school offering despite human rights principles being infused, in both obvious and inconspicuous ways, into every higher education discipline from medicine, psychology and sociology to political science, geography, economics, history and theology (Cargas and Mitoma, 2019).

In recent decades, several notable models have supported educators with the development of their human rights teaching practice, including Flowers et al.'s *Human Rights Education Handbook* (2000) and Betty Reardon's transcendent model for peace education as 'a process of purposeful teaching, learning, and action focused on global and local conflict and peace' (Kester, Aryoubi and Kaldayeva, 2019, p.560). However, these models pre-date, and therefore cannot fully address, contemporary human rights threats such as climate change, humanitarian and refugee crises, digital misinformation / disinformation and economic inequality, or the adverse impacts of such threats on the student generation. They cannot recognise the impact of artificial intelligence on human rights, education and culture (Bakiner, 2023) or consider recent movements to improve representation of marginalised voices and decolonise the human rights curriculum, rebalancing global north and global south perspectives in academic and policy discourse (Ohana et al., 2022). As Cargas and Mitoma (2019, p.276) note, 'although there are many books, manuals, and guides for teaching HRE in primary and secondary schools, far fewer manuals and "how to" books have been written for higher education'.

In the last two decades, the multi-phase efforts of the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-ongoing) and the UN's tripartite '*Learning About, Through and For*' HRE model as set out in the UN Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations, 2011) have contributed to mainstreaming HRE at all levels of formal education (Cargas and Mitoma, 2019; Struthers, 2020). However, HRE teaching is still largely concentrated on the normative traditions, doctrines and mechanisms of international human rights law, offering limited engagement with historical case studies considered too politically sensitive or partisan, controversial, complex or 'triggering' for formal education (Struthers, 2016). This is antithetical to the spirit and purpose of HRE because the historical events that offer the most profound and impactful warnings about complacency are the same events likely to elicit intense and unexpected emotional responses from students with diverse lived experiences. There is also a risk that course content may compound intergenerational or inherited trauma, or 'the ways in which trauma experienced in one generation affects the health and wellbeing of descendants of future

generations' (Sangalang and Vang, 2017, p.745). As over half of UK university students have suffered adverse childhood experiences (ACE), including abuse, neglect or experiencing/witnessing violence (McCloughry, 2024). It follows that, in any one student cohort, the risk that HRE might retraumatise learners with lived or intergenerational experience of an ever-broader spectrum of human rights abuses is significant.

Trauma-informed practice in higher education can be defined as principles and pedagogies that promote a positive, healing and liberating learning experience for learners with complex trauma. In the context of HRE, trauma-informed pedagogical practice can also mitigate adverse responses to human rights teaching and minimise the risk of secondary or vicarious trauma for both teachers and learners, 'young people and adults with trauma histories' (Boylan et al., 2023, p.2). In higher education HRE, trauma-informed pedagogy involves consciously designing and delivering learning experiences grounded in human dignity and principles of respect, equality and inclusion (Young and Castro Schepers, 2024), re-orienting learners from indifference/passive interest towards advocacy/action. As Kaur and Harris (2024) suggest, HRE moves educators away from 'avoidance' and towards 'acceptance' of the inextricable link between trauma and law. Fundamentally, the goal of trauma-informed HRE is to *empower* learners with agency and a safe space to reconceptualise their identity as survivors rather than victims, and educators with a platform to apply their pedagogical expertise and interpersonal skills to move learners away from apathy and towards advocacy.

Methodology

The inclusion of trauma-informed practice in medical and social work education is already well established (Henshaw, 2022), but its adoption in the context of education is a relatively recent phenomenon (Boylan et al., 2023). Until the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, trauma-informed practice in higher education was largely underexplored in scholarship; post-pandemic, enhanced provision for, and sustained commitment to, student wellbeing has contributed to a marked growth in substantive academic and practitioner literature on trauma-informed approaches in education and, more recently, in legal education and legal practice.

For this article, a structured review of current literature was conducted to i) contextualise the central argument of this article, and ii) synthesise current research on trauma-informed pedagogy, in higher education more broadly, and human rights education specifically. This methodology prioritised engagement with highly specialised international journals on higher and human rights education, but, mindful of the more advanced adoption of trauma-informed teaching practice in other disciplines, social/psychology/medical journals were also consulted for transferrable practices and perspectives. This interdisciplinary approach informed the structure of this article, which examines the purpose and practice of trauma-informed human rights education ('TIHRE') in the following ways.

First, the article recommends that human rights educators should clarify and cultivate a rights-respecting teaching persona from the earliest stages of their teaching careers and ideally, as part of teacher training (Struthers, 2016). This persona involves articulating one's own values to identify unconscious biases and recognise one's own position and inherent privilege, a process that Henshaw (2022) calls 'locating' oneself. Second, the article explores strategies to embed trauma-sensitive principles in content design and lesson planning, through student co-creation, project-based learning, a skills-rich curriculum, and the incorporation of reflective practice to help learners reframe trauma and reclaim their power. Finally, the article examines the value of dialogic teaching in the context of TIHRE and recommends that students be offered opportunities for dialogic engagement, not only with each other, but also with practitioners and survivors who have undergone their own journeys of healing, recovery and resilience.

Trauma-informed human rights education (TIHRE)

In the legal profession, there has been growing recognition of the impact of secondary and vicarious trauma on lawyer wellbeing, the legal profession itself prone to 'high rates of untreated mental health and substance abuse challenges within the legal profession' (Katz, 2020, p.19). Although trauma-informed approaches are progressively embedding into legal practice – from family, immigration and criminal law (Katz, 2020) to inquest and public inquiries (House of Lords Statutory Inquiries Committee, 2024) – holistic incorporation of trauma-informed teaching practice across the university law school curriculum has lagged because of an avoidant, 'trauma-lite' approach to acknowledging and working with learner trauma (Kaur and Harris, 2024). As Kaur and Harris (2024) note,

'Discussing trauma and emotions involved in our work is relatively new for the legal profession, and especially new for law schools, even though the struggles of engaging trauma are as old as the profession' (Kaur and Harris, 2024, p.3).

In any cohort of higher education learners – young adults and mature learners combined – there is high probability that individuals within that group may carry lived and intergenerational experiences of trauma. Lived experiences of trauma relate to direct and indirect exposure to a broad spectrum of human rights abuses, from adverse childhood events involving family violence, neglect and abuse, to experiences of armed conflict, genocide, sexual violence and forced displacement. Intergenerational or inherited trauma is experienced by the descendants of parents or grandparents who have fled homelands, armed conflict or the threat of persecution for exile – for example, the experiences of Palestinian families who have lived under decades of Israeli occupation or the families of Jewish and minority peoples persecuted during the Holocaust (Harper and Neubauer, 2021). As Harper and Neubauer (2021) have observed, HRE is often 'focused on events that were so intense and impactful that they have the power to influence members of a community, culture, or society far beyond those who actually experienced the event' (2021, n.p.).

Portell has observed that new approaches to pedagogy and systemic changes in education are being informed by institutional recognition of 'the physiological, social, emotional, and academic impacts of trauma' (Portell, 2019, n.p). This is especially the case in higher education, where learner groups at heightened risk of trauma include young people who have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences, LGBTQ+ students impacted by 'anti-LGBTQ attitudes and behaviours throughout their lives, ranging from covert discrimination to overt acts of violence' (Davidson, 2017, p.11), and student refugees in sanctuary from countries ravaged by war, whose needs may present in more complex ways and are acutely vulnerable to depression and other trauma responses as they 'negotiat[e] difficult, precarious familial and financial circumstances' that compound and deepen the original trauma of forced displacement (Davidson, 2017, p.11). Trauma in university learners can manifest in poor attendance; heightened anxiety about exams, peer group work or public speaking; withdrawal and social isolation; unhealthy risk-taking behaviours and/or engagement with toxic relationships where trauma may be re-enacted (Harper and Neubauer, 2021).

Much of the current literature on trauma-informed practice refers to the authoritative six-part framework of principles developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), which articulates a strategy of embedding, within the provision of the service, the following mechanisms of healing and mitigation from further trauma: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment and choice, and recognition of the holistic cultural, historical and gender issues at play (SAMHSA, 2014). In the learning environment, these six principles amount to the provision of a safe, inclusive and mutually respectful space where learners trust their educators and each other, and there is complete authenticity, acceptance and support from peers and educators and an inherent understanding of intersectionality in the context of inequality, abuse and violations of one's fundamental human rights and of the impact of complex trauma on learner wellbeing (Wilkinson, 2018). With the SAMHSA framework as a background, the following sections explore approaches that educators might take to integrate trauma-informed practice into the learning spaces they create for their students, from understanding their human rights teaching personae to incorporating trauma-informed principles into course design and adopting dialogic pedagogy in TIHRE as 'the essence of education as the practice of freedom' (Freire, 1972, p.81).

Developing a human rights teaching persona in preparation for TIHRE

As a starting point, and as part of 'locating' oneself (Henshaw, 2022), educators should undertake a process of 'values clarification' to manage the risk of bias, however implicit or unconscious, creeping into course content or learner interactions. Values clarification, as defined by Kulich and Chi (2014, p.6902), is:

an educational intervention that includes reflexive personal, sociocultural, and intercultural processes whereby one seeks to identify the undergirding or influential value priorities that guide one's interests, choices, actions, and reactions in a variety of interpersonal and social contexts.

Values clarification is also defined by Fritz and Guthrie (2017, p.47) as 'a dynamic process in which people come to understand what they individually view as important in their lives by placing a name or label to what one values'. This is a process that an individual typically undergoes in their college/university years and one which is also a 'critical component' in leadership education (Fritz and Guthrie, 2017, p.47). By undergoing this

process, educators can arrive at a more nuanced understanding of themselves and the social and cultural milieus in which they teach; in so doing, they can cultivate greater self-awareness of how their own biases (however unconscious), strengths, limitations and unresolved traumas might adversely influence their teaching style and the relationships they build with their learners, colleagues and selves over time.

This self-awareness informs the mindfully curated construction of one's 'teaching persona', or how an educator presents themselves to and interacts with learners as they carry out their various roles and functions, which in any higher education department, often extend significantly beyond teaching. One's teaching persona both influences and is influenced by one's presence and professional identities (Bowman, 2022). 'Presence' in this context is defined by Garrison (2017, p.71) as 'the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realising personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes'. Bowman also defines our professional identities as 'complementary sub-identities or self-concepts that relate to our personal characteristics, the contexts in which we teach, and the relationships we develop with students and colleagues' (Bowman, 2022, p.41).

It can be further argued that three further concepts are central to the development of one's teaching persona because of the interplay between self-identity, intrinsic value and feelings of social connectedness, and these are the building of i) community, ii) capability and iii) confidence. Through community and human interaction comes greater awareness of one's own self and the teacher one wants to *be*. Through this awareness comes belief in one's own capabilities and the capabilities one aspires to build as a teacher. Confidence emerges from this belief in self, and from being seen and valued by the communities one belongs to and those that they build. This is not a static, one-time process; one's teaching persona is a work in progress that continually 'evolves with time and experience' over the course of our careers and is created 'through the actions and pedagogical choices you make, based on the kind of learning environment you want to create' (Bowman, 2022, p.44).

Bowman (2022) has discussed the importance of authenticity in constructing and adopting a teaching persona, warning educators not to disregard or distrust the creation of a 'persona' as 'inauthentic', but rather as an opportunity to present the best, most empathic, sensitive, self-aware and self-attuned version of oneself to learners in the creation of a

transparent, inclusive and rights-aware learning space. For this reason, the clarification of values and the articulation of one's teaching persona should be the first steps in integrating a trauma-informed approach to teaching practice. Understanding who one truly *is* as a human being is key to acquiring the greatest possible understanding of the intrinsic and external motivators that drive the educator. It follows that deeper awareness of how one's own life and lived experiences have coloured one's worldview is essential to ensuring that unconscious biases and educator-held traumas do not compromise the integrity, safety and trust that must be built up in the teaching space for TIHRE.

One way of building such trust is, simply, for educators to know the names and (as best as possible) the backgrounds of learners within a cohort before or in the early weeks of the teaching experience (Schwartz, Hess and Sparrow, 2013). It seems obvious to suggest that educators should take the time to learn students' names, but in reality, this can often prove challenging in the post-pandemic higher education environment of supersized lecture/seminar groups in which many students experiencing anxiety and other psychological effects of trauma may find comfort in anonymity and invisibility (Blatchford, 2020). Rapport and recognition are key to building trust with students and being able to deliver consistent and personalised support for them throughout the duration of their engagement on an educator's course (and often, beyond). As Brunzell, Stokes and Waters (2016) note, educator-learner relationships that are rooted in authentic mutual respect as well as 'empathy, warmth, genuineness, non-directivity, and encouragement of critical thinking, along with reciprocal and secure attachments' tend to result in more positive learner outcomes, learner resilience and improved overall wellbeing (Brunzell, Stokes and Waters, 2016, p.67).

TIHRE and content design

The tripartite framework delivered by the UN in 2011 in its Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training encompasses i) education *about* human rights, 'providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection' (United Nations, 2011, n.p.); ii) education *through* human rights, 'learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners' (United Nations, 2011, n.p.), a part of the framework that is typically overlooked in higher education (Duffy, 2024); and iii) education *for* human rights,

‘empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others’ (United Nations, 2011, n.p.). The most effective TIHRE should embrace and integrate all three parts of this framework, which can be used to construct TIHRE that empowers learners to learn *about, through* and *for* human rights by creating opportunities for meaningful participation and ensuring that learners can exercise autonomy over their lives, choices and situation (Struthers, 2015; Bajaj, 2011).

At its core, all HRE should be designed to empower learners’ discovery of their ‘power with’, defined as ‘coalition building that is necessary to address oppression and inequality’ (Sutherland and Feltey, 2017, p.619, cited Pansardi and Bindi, 2021, p.62) and which, this article argues, is linked with capacity development, defined by the UN as ‘the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world’ (United Nations, n.d.,n.p.). This level of empowerment – that which inspires the learner to take action – is best achieved by explicitly embedding skills and capacity development opportunities into content design, as doing so can transform the experience of learning *about* human rights into one that motivates the learner to themselves model human rights values and rights-respecting behaviour *through* human rights and to channel those values and behaviours in their advocacy and action *for* human rights. Immersive, project-based learning experiences, especially those that enable student/educator co-creation, are an excellent mechanism in the TIHRE classroom to ensure that learners have meaningful and authentic opportunities to acquire valuable practical skills that support participation *for* human rights, such as advocacy, public speaking, campaign planning and legal research and drafting (Cargas, 2019). SAMHSA also recommends, in a toolkit for building community resilience, that leadership development be emphasised in trauma-informed activities, to ‘help people to identify and build on their own strengths, develop and practice skills, and take an active role in addressing internal and external community issues’ (SAMHSA, 2017, p.3).

Ultimately, it is the educator’s responsibility to ensure that their learners feel heard, validated, safe, hopeful for the future, and, importantly, empowered by their own agency because agency is always at the core of human rights realisation, advocacy and action (Liao, 2010). Importantly, learning experiences should be designed to instil self-belief in learners that the actions they take individually and collectively can contribute to the achievement of justice, remedy and reconciliation for victims of human rights abuses. In

this way, trauma-informed teaching practice ultimately empowers learners through their *own* process of values clarification (Brunzell, Stokes and Waters, 2016). To do so, human rights teaching should be designed to ensure that there is minimal risk of retraumatizing students with lived experience of rights violations and/or adverse childhood/life events. The topics and materials explored should never be so graphic as to induce retraumatization in learners with lived experience or secondary traumatization – ‘emotional distress that results in hearing about the firsthand experiences of another’ (SAMHSA, 2014, p.9) – in other learners or in the educator. Nor should they ever compromise the dignity of victims by engaging with ‘trauma porn’, which refers to ‘media that showcases [people’s] pain and trauma in excessive amounts for the sake of entertainment’ (Brittany, 2020, cited Gatwiri and Mapedzahama, 2022, p.276). Davidson (2017, p.18) further advises educators to ensure they do not ‘romanticise trauma narratives’, as doing so diminishes the dignity of survivors and represents a continuation of their exploitation and abuse. TIHRE calls for educators to ensure learning outcomes that promote survival, strength, psychological resilience and the ability to ‘overcome life’s difficulties’ (Garnezy, 1991, p.421). However, any work in ‘resilience building’ should be undertaken with the utmost care because, as Satkunanathan (2021, n.d.) has pointed out, the danger in romanticising resilience is that it may ‘make us oblivious to the fact that...survival/coping mechanisms could be exploitative and increase the vulnerability of people in unforeseen ways’.

It is accepted good practice to articulate in course handbooks and outlines, within module descriptors, and at the outset of lectures and seminars, that the course deals with issues that may be considered painful, polarising or controversial to some learners. This approach gives learners time to mentally prepare themselves to engage, but, as Davidson (2017) warns, ‘opinions about the use of “trigger warnings” ... are mixed [and] some students may find even the word “trigger” objectionable because it implies something out of their control’ (Davidson, 2017, p.17). Even for students who do not themselves have lived experience of a traumatic human rights event, Cannon et al. (2020) agree that students should be made aware in advance that the learning experience carries the potential for secondary trauma, defined as ‘an indirect experience of or exposure to a traumatic event’ (PTSD UK, 2025, n.p.), or vicarious trauma, which can impact ‘anyone who engages empathetically with survivors of traumatic incidents, torture, and material relating to their trauma ... including doctors and other health professionals’ (British Medical Association, 2025, n.p.) and, increasingly, legal practitioners and educators. Educators

might also incorporate ‘wellbeing check-ins’ into the lecture or seminar agenda and make themselves available to students who need to talk through the learning experience and any concerning feelings that the experience may have provoked (Schwartz, Hess and Sparrow, 2013). These actions deepen mutual trust and affirm to the learner that theirs is a ‘safe learning space’, thus satisfying three of the six SAMHSA principles for trauma-informed practice – safety, transparency and trustworthiness (SAMHSA, 2014, p.10).

Maintaining flexibility within the course outlines and lesson plans allows the educator to hold space for collaboration and valuable input from the learners, and to co-design parts of the curriculum with learners as part of the learning experience. In the context of HRE, this may involve giving learners a list of pertinent human rights issues featuring currently in the news and inviting them to self-select the issues they would like to case study in the session. Exercises might also be scheduled to coincide with significant human rights milestones or International Days and Weeks observed by the UN to provide context, relevance and immediacy to the content and themes being covered. Co-creation of HRE empowers the learner to make core decisions over what and how they learn, and satisfies SAMSHA’s ‘collaboration’ principle, which calls for ‘actively collaborating with students and educators to make critical decisions about teaching and learning [and] engaging students in collaborative decision making about course content, teaching modalities, assessment strategies, and deadlines’ (Harper and Neubauer, 2021, p.21). Co-design of TIHRE curricula also aligns with a recommendation from Brunzell, Stokes and Waters (2016, p.76) that trauma-informed curricula should be designed around the learners’ *own* identification of ‘messages, heroes and paragons of resilience’ to create and support a ‘resilient mindset’ within learner groups.

It is not possible to explore TIHRE design without considering the powerful outcomes of embedding reflective resilience-building exercises into teaching plans, inviting learners to critically evaluate and analyse their responses to the learning experience, and then consider the direct and specific actions they may take *for* human rights as a result. Use of an established, action-oriented reflective model such as Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle (1988) invites learners to reflect on all three phases of the UN framework (*about, through* and *for* human rights) in the six steps of the cycle, as follows. In ‘description’ (the first step of the Gibbs Cycle), learners might reflect on their foundational learning *about* human rights history, principles, norms and mechanisms; in the following steps, they learn *through* human rights by evaluating and analysing their feelings and emotional responses to the

session content and activities; and in the final step, the 'action plan', learners can articulate how they will build on their learning *for* human rights and set out the concrete actions they may take in their advocacy and awareness building.

Reflective practice is already a key trauma-informed approach in clinical settings because it promotes practitioner self-awareness, empathy for others as well as for one's own self and the early identification of unconscious biases and assumptions, and it can help prevent retraumatisation or secondary traumatisation (Lilienfeld and Basterfield, 2020). For reflective writing tasks in a TIHRE setting, educators can use structured prompts inviting learners to evaluate and analyse their emotional responses to the session, and to plan for self-care after the learning experience concludes. Incorporating reflective tasks in session design ensures that each TIHRE session ends with internalisation of the learner's empowerment, which is the central outcome that TIHRE is designed to promote.

TIHRE and dialogic learning

In a dialogic, trauma-informed teaching space, the educator builds rapport and trust from the beginning of the course so that learners can confidently engage in discursive exploration of complex and challenging subject matter, in what Freire called 'a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialogues is the logical consequence', one that is founded upon 'love, humility, and faith' (Freire, 1972, p.91). Dialogic learning is intrinsically aligned with the second part of the UN framework, learning *through* human rights, because of the emphasis it places on mutual respect and the reimagining of the traditional power structures in the student-teacher relationship. As Duffy (2024, n.p.) notes:

Dialogue is the conduit for human rights education, which ideally occurs under conditions of equality and discursive respect. For this practice to work successfully traditional relationships between students and instructors need to be transformed, replaced by horizontal relationships of dialogue.

The TIHRE experience is one in which learners are consistently treated as 'worthy of respect and capable of learning, regardless of experiences', where learning is considered 'a dialogue among equals', and where learners have the opportunity for self-reflection that enables them to 'renegotiate their beliefs about themselves in relation to the rest of the world' (Davidson, 2017, p.12). Effective HRE acknowledges the darkest parts of

humanity's history but at the same time seeks to imbue the learner with hope. Human rights history is filled with empowering stories of how the human spirit has survived atrocity crimes and how, amidst some of the world's most traumatic events, human beings have found strength in community, in that 'trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common cultural background can' (Erikson, 1991, p.459). Erikson (1991, p.459) calls this the 'communal dimension' of trauma and healing, where human experiences such as learning and education can inspire 'otherwise unconnected individuals who share a traumatic experience [to] seek one another out and develop a form of communality'. As HRE is inherently dialogic (Baxi, 1994), it follows that module design for TIHRE should be dialogic by design – in other words, consciously constructed as interactive, human-centred and discussion-based, designed to build critical thinking, capacity and community to promote deeper understanding, healing and connection between learners.

Dialogic teaching, 'the essence of education as the practice of freedom' (Freire, 1972, p.81) is 'aimed at developing the participants' critical examination of the oppressive reality in which they live, and at enabling them to take action that can change the social reality, advancing justice and equality' (Halabi, 2022, p.416). Thus, in the context of TIHRE, it is oriented around building the confidence to critically unpack and meaningfully explore the realities of human rights history and contemporary challenges in an inclusive, respectful learning environment, to use those skills to take appropriate action. As such, dialogic teaching is aligned with the second and third parts of the UN framework on learning *through* and *for* human rights. In TIHRE, the dialogic teaching space allows for 'disclosure in a safe setting' and the development of learners' 'communicative competence' which is a critical skill for any university graduate to develop (Walzer, 2021). Dialogic teaching also supports skills development in the university curriculum on critical thinking and analytical skills; as Freire (1972, p.92) writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, '[o]nly dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking'.

In a dialogic TIHRE environment, opportunities should be embedded into every part of the learning experience to develop competence in advocacy to ensure that graduates have the communication skills to successfully articulate and defend their arguments *for* human rights. This may still represent significant challenges post-pandemic as many learners in higher education continue to grapple with anxiety over oral participation, which has led to calls for mandatory training in public speaking for all students in higher education (Hall,

2024). Educators should embrace opportunities in the dialogic teaching environment to hand the spotlight to learners and take a mindful and deferential step back when they exhibit leadership and willingness to share their experiences or perspectives, even if it feels initially uncomfortable or counterintuitive to do so because of outdated views on the roles of the educators and learners and the imbalanced power dynamics that have become entrenched in higher education as a result.

In their session design, educators can consciously create a platform for dialogic engagement with survivors outside of the higher education environment as well as the professionals who work directly with them in support of their healing – lawyers and NGO workers among them (Cannon et al., 2020). Post-pandemic, inviting guest speakers to engage with learners through virtual Q&A sessions is now straightforward to organise through videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom or Teams no matter where in the world the speaker resides, or the classroom is situated. Integrating lived experiences and infusing survivor and practitioner perspectives into the dialogic teaching space – through guest speaker appearances, interviews and lectures, both in person and virtually – is underutilised as a pedagogical practice in UK higher education, in which guest speakers themselves *are* the pedagogy (Pepple et al., 2025; Kong, 2018). In this author's experience, incorporating guest speaker sessions with a substantive Q&A segment attached into lesson planning and overall module design offers learners unparalleled opportunities for dialogic enrichment as well as skills development and coalition building, and bridges the stubborn gap between academic/theoretical knowledge and application in the real world (Pepple et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This article has considered the preparation for, and implementation of, trauma-informed human rights teaching practice in the higher education space. It has explored the empowering effects on learners of integrating trauma-informed pedagogical practice into module content and curriculum design, as well as pedagogical approaches that can be taken to inform, engage and inspire learners away from avoidance and towards rights-based advocacy and action *for* human rights. Towards this aim, the article makes several recommendations which are summarised briefly as follows. First, it recommends that educators examine their teaching personae and clarify their values, motivations and behaviours to identify and address any inherent and unconscious biases at the outset that

may adversely impact the inclusivity and authenticity of the learning experience. Second, embedding trauma-informed principles into content design and planning, using creative and experiential pedagogies, is critical to managing the risk of retraumatisation, alienation, avoidance or disruption to the learner-educator journey. And third, as HRE is dialogic in nature, learners should be encouraged to meaningfully engage, not only with each other, but also with practitioners and survivors of human rights abuses, who can inspire learners with narratives of dignity, agency and reconciliation. Ultimately, trauma-informed practice in human rights teaching should empower learners and teachers as catalysts for hope, healing and reconciliation, and put wellbeing, agency and dignity at the heart of their shared learning experience.

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