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Re-envisioning Learning through a Trauma-informed Lens: Empowering Students in Their Personal and Academic Growth

Ashley M. Hooper
University of California

Misbah Hyder
Notre Dame University

Thomas Colclough
University of California, Irvine

Daniel Mann
University of California, Irvine

Abstract: We incorporated trauma-informed principles into the design of a synchronous, online Religion and Politics course and then evaluated impacts on student learning through qualitative methods. Using a novel approach, students self-evaluated their learning throughout the course in weekly reflections. Using content analysis and directed coding techniques, we analyzed students' reflection assessments for themes of trauma-informed principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. We found that students co-developed a sense of safety by engaging in respectful peer dialogue; established trustworthiness through self-disclosure of personal beliefs; collaborated with peers to develop a deeper understanding of course content; and acquired transferable skills through choice in assessments. In addition, students experienced empowerment by recognizing their growth in four primary areas: (1) their personal beliefs and perspectives; (2) their understanding of the course material; (3) their learning; and (4) their ability to use academic tools. Our findings extend and support existing research on the efficacy of trauma-informed practices; furthermore, our research suggests that incorporating trauma-informed principles into course design can support students in their learning as well as bolster their capacity to succeed in other areas inside and outside of the classroom (e.g., engaging in difficult conversations, seeking out support, using transferable skills in other contexts, applying course content to their own lives). Finally, our case study presents innovative approaches for assessing how students engage with trauma-informed course design.

*Keywords**:** trauma-informed, course design, collaborative learning, empowerment, religion*

Introduction

Trauma is highly prevalent among undergraduates, whether instructors choose to acknowledge it or not (Stephens, 2020). A majority of students attending college experience a traumatic event in their lifetime (Frazier et al., 2009). Trauma poses an even higher risk to several marginalized and underrepresented groups of students, including veterans, current and former foster youth, American Indian/Alaska Native students, refugees, LGBTQ students, and nontraditional adult learners (Davidson, 2017). The prevalence of trauma means that mental health problems also persist among the undergraduate population (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Furthermore, trauma among undergraduates is exacerbated by a series of intersecting social traumas, including the COVID-19 pandemic (Carello & Thompson, 2021), police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement (Stephens, 2020), and food and housing insecurity (Marquart & Baez, 2021, pp. 68–69).

Important in the context of improving teaching and learning in higher education, traumatic experiences and/or content may negatively impact students' learning as well as instructors' teaching. Students are at risk of experiencing negative classroom experiences when learning about content that can be potentially traumatic (e.g., religion, criminal justice), including retraumatization (Carello & Butler, 2014, Carello & Butler, 2015, p. 263), vicarious traumatization in response to coursework (Carello & Butler, 2014, pp. 158–159; Zartner, 2019), and compassion fatigue and burnout (Zartner, 2019). Trauma is a strong predictor of poor academic achievement (Anders et al., 2012; Arnwine, 2019, p. 77; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004), high attrition rates (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Duncan, 2000; Porche et al., 2011), and low student engagement (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Craig, 2016; Craig, 2017). Instructors also face challenges when teaching potentially traumatizing material (Carello & Butler, 2014, p. 159; Nikischer, 2019; Walters & Anderson, 2021). Risks include retraumatization, compassion fatigue (Davidson, 2017; Stephens, 2020, p. 449), vicarious trauma (Carello & Butler, 2015, p. 263; Zartner, 2019), and teacher burnout (Pines, 2002; Zartner, 2019).

Research has shown that approaching teaching using a trauma-informed pedagogy can mitigate some of the risks associated with teaching potentially traumatic content, both for students (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2019; Carello & Butler, 2014; Carello & Butler, 2015; Cless & Nelson-Goff, 2017; Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Morgan, Pendergast, Brown, & Heck, 2015), including marginalized groups of students and those from underrepresented minorities (Tang & Kiang, 2011; Wilson & Nelson-Moody, 2019), and instructors (Walters & Anderson, 2021). Five core principles underlie a trauma-informed pedagogy: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (Fallot & Harris, 2009). Various classroom-level strategies have been described for developing a trauma-informed pedagogical approach based on these five core principles in higher education (Carello & Butler, 2015; Davidson, 2017; Fenner, 2018; Tang & Kiang, 2011).

However, research exploring the impact of trauma-informed approaches on students' learning experiences is still fairly limited. Some studies assess students' own reports of their classroom experiences by prompting students to link their experiences to one of the five core principles underlying the trauma-informed approach (Agllias, 2012; Black, 2008; Carello & Butler, 2015). Breckenridge & James (2010) analyzed student course evaluations, investigating students' self-awareness of their own responses to trauma and their capacity to cope with and respond to traumatic experiences. Other studies have investigated the impact of a trauma-informed approach to courses that involve potentially traumatic content in a graduate student setting (Bussey, 2008; Shannon et al., 2014; Zosky, 2013). There is a call for further exploration of students' perspectives on trauma-informed practices (Carello & Butler, 2015; Stephens, 2020).

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study, in which we used a trauma-informed approach to teach content that can be personally traumatic for students (religion and politics) within the context of several intersecting social traumas (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice). We incorporated principles of trauma-informed pedagogy into the course design of an undergraduate, synchronously taught online *Religion and Politics* course and then evaluated students' weekly reflection assignments. We investigated how using a trauma-informed lens impacts students' learning, by asking the following research question: How are themes of trauma-informed principles reflected in students' learning experiences and growth?

The novelty in our approach lies in the fact that students were not asked to link their experiences to the five core principles underlying a trauma-informed pedagogy in their reflections. Instead, the weekly reflection assignments asked students to connect the course material to current events and their daily lives. Therefore, we analyzed the impact of our trauma-informed approach by examining the themes of trauma-informed principles that were reflected organically in students' learning experiences. Upon analysis, we found elements of each core principle underlying a trauma-informed approach reflected in students' responses. In particular, our analysis revealed that students:

(1) co-developed a sense of safety by engaging in respectful peer dialogue; (2) established trustworthiness through self-disclosure of personal beliefs and experiences; (3) collaborated with peers to develop a deeper understanding of course content; (4) developed transferable skills through choice in assessments; and (5) experienced empowerment by recognizing growth in their learning (having their beliefs and/or preconceived notions reaffirmed or challenged by course material and discussion) and their learning potential (using skills developed in the course to continue their personal, intellectual, and academic growth).

Methods

Case Study Selection

For our qualitative case study, we selected a *Religion and Politics* course at the University of California, Irvine. We selected this particular course for our case study, as the class explored subject matter that may be considered traumatic for students due to their personal, cultural, and/or familial experiences with religion and politics. For example, students read articles, watched videos, and discussed topics related to colonialism and indigeneity, terrorism, slavery, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Students may have experienced discrimination because of their religious identities or because other aspects of their identities (e.g., sexual orientation) are rejected by others in the name of religion. For example, Muslim Americans frequently experience microaggressions due to their religious identity (Husain & Houward, 2017). Lowe et al. (2019) found experiencing religious discrimination increased risks of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms for Muslim college students. As another example, students within the LGBTQ community may be excluded and rejected by their family members, due to religious beliefs (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010).

In addition to being paired with experiences of discrimination and rejection, religion can be intertwined with traumas associated with horrific violence (e.g., genocide) and physical and psychological harm (e.g., sexual assault). Adults may experience intergenerational trauma, as a result of familial and social legacies of religious genocide and other atrocities (e.g., the Holocaust) (Dashorst et al., 2019). Others have experienced sexual abuse and assault by religious leaders, as exemplified by the Mormon and Catholic Church's sex abuse scandals. In these cases, the trauma of sexual violence is compounded by religious beliefs and the egregious abuses of power tolerated within religious institutions and communities; as Goodwin (2020) argues "survivors of religious sex abuse must negotiate their relationship to religious communities, religious spaces and rituals, and to the divine" (Goodwin, 2020, p. 140). While experiences of racism, homophobia, and other forms of abuse do occur in varying forms in a vast majority of spaces, there is something unique about these forms of trauma being perpetrated in religious spaces (Goodwin, 2020). Furthermore, psychological, emotional, and physical traumas with religious implications are amplified by the politics that play out within familial and legal systems (Muldoon et al., 2020). For example, bodily autonomy and abortion access, marriage equality, and gender affirming healthcare access for transgender youth are all highly politicized (Pérez, 2007).

In addition to exploring potentially traumatizing topics, the class took place remotely (due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic) and during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests. In addition to the collective trauma of these events (which may disproportionately impact students of color), the pandemic exacerbated underlying issues of food, housing, and income insecurity (Enriquez & Goldstein, 2020; Linton, Leifheit, McGinty, Barry, & Pollack, 2021; Parekh et al., 2021). For example, in 2020, 39 percent of University of California undergraduates reported experiencing food insecurity during enrollment. Food insecurity was even higher for underrepresented undergraduates

(e.g., Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino and American Indian) at 50 percent. Furthermore, 5 percent of University of California undergraduates reported experiencing homelessness during enrollment (University of California, 2020).

Course Design

Drawing from literature outlining approaches to and ideas for incorporating trauma-informed principles (e.g., Stephens, 2020; Carello & Butler, 2015), we structured the course with intention to integrate safety (i.e., protected from physical and psychological harm), trustworthiness (i.e., recognizing reliability, consistency, and dependability in others), collaboration (i.e., individuals working together with a shared purpose and toward a common benefit), choice (i.e., allowing for the ability to make decisions), and empowerment (i.e., helping the student discover and develop their own capacities). We structured the course in a way that centered students as *capable* actors in their own learning process, with a capacity to develop and use tools and resources, to apply the course content to their own lived experiences, and to critically examine their own beliefs. As we describe below, we framed the learning process as dependent on and strengthened by participation of everyone in the course, established clear and consistent expectations, conveyed a welcoming and kind tone, and provided multiple opportunities for support.

Engaging Students in Their Learning Process

Important to the conditions for trustworthiness (i.e., developed through empowering participants), the course syllabus stressed that the course was structured in a student-centered way, meant to guide students as they applied the course content to their own lived experiences and critically examined their own beliefs. The syllabus conveyed that students had agency and responsibility in their learning process and in the course (e.g., making up missing assignments, contributing to course content), which reinforces another aspect of 'trustworthiness': establishing positive expectations in others. In addition, the syllabus and course policies explicitly discussed the importance of students being engaged as a key part in their learning (e.g., being clear about exploring their own positionality in their examinations of religion and politics). For example, the syllabus stated that "...all assignments center on how you are drawing connections between the course materials and your experiences."

Emphasizing Collaboration

The syllabus and course policies signaled the importance of collaboration by framing the learning process as being a shared experience dependent on the participation of everyone in the course. For example, the course description frequently used language that indicated a shared process of learning (e.g., "we," "us," "collectively"). Beyond using language that framed the class as collaborative from the beginning, the course design required students to engage with each other through in-class and online discussions. These discussions were described as being an integral part of the learning process and important for all students.

Encouragement to Use Resources and Make Selections

The course structure emphasized empowerment, by encouraging students to use tools and resources to guide their learning process, while providing flexibility and choice. For example, students were encouraged to look at the Q&A discussion board to see if other students had asked a similar question when they needed help, before emailing the instructor. For weekly reflections (which were graded in

terms of completeness/effort as opposed to content), students were asked to use course texts to bolster their arguments; this practice allowed students to engage with scholarship when articulating their ideas as well as gave students practice in reading and applying academic journal articles. In weekly reflection assignments students were also asked to find current media stories and events that illustrated examples of theoretical concepts and themes discussed in class. By reviewing and selecting media articles, students learned how to find and examine examples of concepts learned in class in local and global contexts. Requiring students to engage in their own discovery of current events and to use scholarship in support of their arguments was meant to empower students, by helping them apply course content to explain situations happening in real-world contexts. Reflection assignments also allowed students to make their own choices in terms of topics to investigate, media articles to select, and formats for assessments (e.g., written or video recording). By offering numerous ways to engage in the material, students were able to pursue the topics most interesting to them (within theoretical frameworks discussed in the course) as well as articulate their ideas in whichever format they were most comfortable expressing themselves (e.g., verbally or in written format).

Setting a "Safe" Tone for Learning

The course site and syllabus included various imagery that conveyed safety through diversity and friendliness. For example, the image selected for the course syllabus included an image of people from various religious backgrounds, genders, and ethnicities engaging in the same practice (i.e., holding their hands in a position of prayer). This conveyed a commitment to highlighting diversity of religion and identifying shared commonality in the same image. As another example, the syllabus frequently included "smiley faces" to pair a positive emotional connotation with the text outlining the course policies. These images helped to convey a welcoming and kind tone for both the course and the instructor. In addition, the instructor set a welcoming tone through the pre-course survey. The survey not only included self-disclosure from the instructor (e.g., acknowledging that mental health and wellbeing is important), but allowed students the opportunity to share and acknowledge areas where they might need additional support. For example, the survey asked the following questions:

1. Would you consider yourself an introvert or extrovert in classroom settings? (You can skip this question if you'd prefer not to respond.)
2. For students participating in synchronous class discussions: are you more comfortable participating in class verbally or through the Zoom chat?
3. Do you have any concerns about accessing resources, including basic needs (food, shelter, medical care), psychological care and counseling, or access to technology that you wish to share with me?
4. Do you have any accessibility requests or general concerns you would like to tell me about, regarding remote learning, the course subject matter, accommodations, or other? (For example, materials available in a different format, transcriptions, specific approaches to discussion boards, a preference of video discussion vs. discussion boards, etc.?)

Furthermore, to reinforce aspects of trustworthiness during class sessions, the instructor disclosed personal information relevant to positionality (e.g., religious identity and experience) with students. Sharing personal experiences with students during discussions where applicable was intended to foster an environment where students felt comfortable disclosing their experiences and contributing to discussions and peer learning exercises.

Communicating Opportunities for Support

The syllabus clarified that office hours could be used to discuss personal issues, in addition to course content. Important for physical and emotional safety concerns, the syllabus mentioned that students could email in advance, if office hours needed to be held privately to discuss course material and/or personal matters. Additionally, students could make office hours by appointment. As students were participating in the class virtually (and many attending from spaces shared with others), allowing students to set a more private time for office hours allowed them to discuss personal matters in conditions that were suitable for them.

In addition to creating safety through traditional office hours, the instructor also established an optional "muddiest point" or "MP" office hour following one of the biweekly classes. The MP office hour was described as an optional, ungraded space for students to ask any questions about the course content (e.g., authors' arguments, concepts discussed in class). Importantly the syllabus framed the MP hour as a space for students to ask even those questions they assume are obvious and unnecessary. By making it clear that no questions would be judged, the syllabus and MP hour signaled to students that they should feel comfortable asking for help and clarification.

The instructor also established a student-only discussion board to allow students to ask questions within each topic module (with an option for bringing the instructor into the conversation if necessary). This provided students with another avenue to ask for help as well as the opportunity to communicate primarily with their peers. For those students who feel more comfortable asking peers for clarification (rather than the instructor), having this additional space to communicate could be helpful.

The instructor conveyed that students could seek out additional resources beyond the instructor and their peers if needed. For example, the syllabus referenced a variety of centers on campus that could help them with academic and personal support (e.g., food assistance, writing support, disability services). Attempting to destigmatize seeking out services, the pre-course survey and syllabus also emphasized that being a student can be stressful and that the university offered various forms of support to help in addressing various challenges. This may have been helpful for those students feeling uncomfortable or uncertain in getting support outside of the classroom.

Establishing Consistency

By establishing clear and consistent expectations in the syllabus (and following through with these expectations), the instructor signaled qualities of trustworthiness by demonstrating reliability, consistency, and dependability. For example, the weekly assignments followed a similar formula (e.g., format, word length, grading criteria, due date) that created dependability throughout the class. As another example, students were given a description of how weekly reflections would be graded (completeness rather than content) and given the opportunity to continually practice the same reflective exercise over the weeks and become comfortable with a less traditional grading scheme.

Collecting Feedback

The instructor administered several surveys throughout the course to collect feedback and student information and to "ensure that [their] experience in the course is as positive as possible." By including the course feedback surveys in the syllabus, the instructor signaled that students would have the opportunity to share their perspectives associated with participating in the class (e.g., positive or negative) and that the instructor cared about assessing their emotional experiences as students. Feedback was collected halfway through the term; one survey asked students to share how well they

have been able to keep up with course expectations while the other asked students to share their feedback regarding the instruction of the class. A final course evaluation survey was administered at the end of the course.

Communicating Privacy Policies

At the beginning of the class, students were asked to complete a survey that collected personal information, so the instructor could connect the course content to their diverse backgrounds and experiences (e.g., personal religious beliefs, familial religious affiliation). However, students were assured that their responses would be anonymous. Similarly, students were given assurances that their personal weekly reflections would not be shared with any other students in the course. In addition, the syllabus made it clear that while the instructor-speaking portions of lectures would be recorded, all student discussions would only be recorded with explicit consent from students. This allowed for students to discuss topics openly during class, without worrying that these comments would be recorded and shared without their approval.

Participants

Twenty-two undergraduate students enrolled in the course participated in the study. All students were undergraduate students attending University of California, Irvine. Students were notified of the research project at the beginning of the course, verbally and in writing, and were given the opportunity to opt out. No students opted out of the study. This study was approved as exempt by the University of California, Irvine, IRB (IRB#1982).

Data collection

We collected weekly reflection assessments from 22 undergraduate students in the course. In addition to discussing the course material within the reflection assignments, students discussed the role of religion in their daily lives. In the final course reflection, students reviewed their initial reflection assignment and color coded their responses to indicate phrases they agreed with, no longer agreed with, and/or were unsure if they agreed with. As students were given the choice to submit written assignments or audio recordings, we transcribed and/or evaluated recordings for two students and written reflections for 20 students. The reflection assignment prompts can be found in the Appendix.

Data analysis

The reflections were analyzed using directed content analysis methods, where initial coding categories are developed prior to evaluating the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We developed a coding scheme based on the literature outlining the following trauma-informed principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. For each code (e.g., safety), we defined the principle (e.g., sense of emotional and physical safety), conditions for development (e.g., co-created by those present and participating), and possible examples (e.g., a student describes the classroom as a “safe space”). Two of the co-authors then coded the reflections using the directed coding scheme; as the coding process continued, the initial coding scheme was revised and refined to develop data themes. Furthermore, both coders reviewed and discussed their respective codes as well as the directed coding scheme, to support the consistency and reliability of the analysis. Reflections were blinded by the instructor prior to data analysis; to provide anonymity to the students in the course, each student was assigned a numbered code. The instructor, a co-author on this paper, did not analyze the data.

Findings

Safety

Analysis of the reflections revealed that students experienced safety as co-developed through (1) engaging in respectful discussions with diverse peers, (2) addressing difficult concepts, and (3) being emotional and sharing their feelings with the instructor and with their peers. Due to the active listening and respect established in class communication, the pedagogical techniques of the instructor (e.g., creating spaces for asking questions), and the opportunity to express feelings in written reflections, the course created an environment where students felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences and divergent opinions as well as discussing difficult topics. Importantly, students were able to apply course material to the lived experiences of their peers as well as explore how course theories might apply to contexts outside of the classroom.

Engaging with Peers

Students framed the course as providing a space where they felt safe to share their ideas, beliefs, emotions, and fears in an environment free of judgment. A sense of safety related most prominently to in-class discussions; importantly, safety was characterized as being co-created by peers and through the process of engaging in respectful, open, and honest dialogue with each other. In particular, students appreciated the opportunity to have conversations with peers of differing religions and identities: "With my classmates sharing those experiences and what they believed in, I was able to expand on my knowledge of the various religions even within our school." Having a safe space to engage in discussions with peers from diverse backgrounds and perspectives not only helped students understand the material but allowed students to practice engaging in respectful dialogue with people with different cultural backgrounds: "It is really nice to be having conversations with other people who have completely different values and trains of thought in a non-aggressive and genuine manner… I really wish I could take those conversations and replay them and just smile and appreciate how great they are."

Exploring Difficult Topics

Students also described the instructional methods (e.g., exploring contentious topics rather than shying away from them, allowing multiple avenues for students to share their questions/perceptions) as creating a safe space for delving into topics that might cause emotional distress in other contexts. Furthermore, students felt safe to share their challenges in understanding the material as well as share perspectives that differed from those explored in the texts or shared by the instructor. In addition to feeling safe to engage with peers with different ideologies, perspectives, and experiences, the course was characterized as a unique space to discuss topics that are considered "off limits" or more difficult to discuss in other spaces (e.g., with friends or family). For example, one student said: "[The instructor] didn't avoid controversial or sensitive topics; that created a safe space that made me feel like I could ask questions, share my opinions, or discuss any interpretations. This approach to teaching taught me the importance of not shying away from overwhelming topics and that breaking down the factors can provide a whole picture of the topic."

Sharing Emotions

Due to the format of the assessments and the grading methods, students also discussed feeling safe to express themselves genuinely and with emotion. Overall, reflections indicated that students felt safe to discuss difficult topics that might not be discussed or explored in other contexts and in ways that felt emotionally authentic and manageable. The freedom to express themselves with a sense of authenticity, both with each other and the instructor, was also reflected in their opinions about their classwork: "I learned that when I speak about things that cause me profound inquiry, I get very emotional, and perhaps that isn't the best. I found that I can do this and be taken seriously by my grader, but that this also feels more genuine to me than perhaps any other paper that I've written."

Trustworthiness

In the student reflections, the theme of trustworthiness appeared primarily through self-disclosure in reflections. Self-disclosure reinforces a dependability in others, by signaling investment in relationships and a closer connection with the instructor (Henry & Thorsen, 2021; Cayanus et al., 2009). In reflections students freely disclosed highly personal information about their experiences, their beliefs, and their perceptions. Having students share their experience with religion not only provided an opportunity for students to explore, discuss, and reflect on their personal relationship with religion, but provided students the opportunity to practice developing connections between their own positionalities and the themes explored within course texts.

Participating in Self-disclosure

Disclosures pertained to a variety of topics that indicated trust in the instructor, in peers, and in the process of reflection (e.g., admitting intolerance toward others due to their beliefs, discussing feeling stereotyped for their own beliefs, discussing familial conflicts due to religion, sharing consternation about their spiritual or non-spiritual identities being in conflict with other values). For example, students shared how religion reinforced or exacerbated family tensions (e.g., not feeling accepted by Christian parents due to identifying as LGBTQ) and shaped their experiences as first-generation Americans (e.g., experiencing cultural and religious tensions). Students also shared their beliefs and fears about death, life, and afterlife as well as explained how these conceptions related to their sense of morality (e.g., connotations of 'sin'). Students shared how religion shaped their relationship with gender norms, sexuality, and choice in pursuing particular lifepaths. Students also shared how religion provided them with comfort (e.g., grieving the passing of family members, dealing with anxiety and depression, finding purpose in life) as well as presented uncomfortable aspects to grapple with (e.g., acknowledging implications of and/or history of religious oppressions and their personal prejudices and biases). Those students with more secular beliefs disclosed personal information across similar topics, juxtaposing their personal beliefs and worldviews with their ideas of how religious individuals viewed similar topics differently. We note that representative quotes exemplifying self-disclosure are omitted due to the personal content of those quotes. We also note that the themes of safety and trustworthiness seem to be mutually reinforcing; students must have felt safe to disclose personal beliefs with their instructor and their peers, and disclosure of personal views contributed to a sense of safety.

Collaboration

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the theme of collaboration appeared most prominently in the context of in-class and small group discussions and group exercises. The collaborative process primarily pertained to students collectively helping each other examine course content as well as their own belief systems and positionality. Collaborations were primarily impactful in two ways: (1) students were able to engage with diverse views via collaboration, and (2) collaborations helped deepen students' understanding of material.

Engaging with Diverse Views

Based on reflections, students openly shared their personal experiences (e.g., experiencing intolerance due to sexual orientation, gender, religion, race/ethnicity, immigration status) with each other in their smaller groups. Sharing among peers exposed students to different perspectives, ways of thinking, and world views. Some students described the divergent perspectives in interpretation as an interesting aspect of the co-learning process: "I found it interesting that more often than not in these five weeks I was contrasting with my fellow classmates, but in the most beautiful way. Contrast in interpretation, but a lot of commonalities in overall experience and feeling." Students also shared how learning with peers encouraged them to re-evaluate and challenge their own beliefs and preconceived notions: "The whole class discussions and the breakout rooms were really eye-opening experiences for me...I really enjoyed this course as a whole because it gave me the opportunity to see things in a different perspective and change my perception on religion and society." To a lesser extent, collaborations were also impactful by reaffirming students' existing views on religion, secularism, and spirituality.

Deepening Understanding of Material

Importantly, in addition to having the opportunity to share different views and interpretations, students discussed how these peer discussions helped deepen their understanding of the class material. Students were able to explain concepts to each other and provide supporting examples from their own lives to help illustrate concepts explored in the class. Peer discussions also reassured students having difficulty in understanding a concept, as other students helped to explain concepts or shared their uncertainty in understanding the material as well. Students frequently discussed the importance of collaborative discussions for their learning. For example: "It was always insightful to get a different perspective on my own religion and learn new things about their religions and how it relates to class. It's one thing to learn about religion from media, articles, and readings, and it's so insightful to learn it from others. So it's always helpful to hear the perspectives of my peers."

Choice

The theme of choice emerged primarily in relationship to the flexibility within the reflection assignment itself. While prompted to reflect on certain topics, students were given a choice in terms of what content to discuss and what information to share. Furthermore, students had a choice in selecting current events and media stories that related to the theoretical concepts being discussed in the course texts. Choice in these contexts was experienced in four ways: (1) flexibility broadened students' perspectives, including those on the course material, (2) flexibility encouraged students to develop transferable skills, (3) flexibility allowed students to feel included, and (4) flexibility was an enjoyable aspect of the class.

Broadening Perspectives

Overall, students felt the choice to explore certain topics in greater depth made the course more challenging; however, the challenge was framed positively as intellectually stimulating and engaging. Students also shared that selecting particular topics/stories to explore in greater depth allowed for deeper engagement with and exploration of course material and of topics with personal resonance. For example, one student said: "Being able to supplement a current event to the readings and understand the theme in a different way made it easier for me to understand the phenomena and themes that the readings discussed. I think the challenging part was connecting the source and reading to my own personal views… so it was interesting to challenge myself into building an opinion regarding religion, spirituality, and secularism." Other students shared how the process of the reflection assignment (i.e., having the flexibility to investigate different current events in relation to the course material) helped them to learn more effectively: "Weekly reflections allowed me to make connections between the current events and course materials. In addition, having to reflect on what we learned gave me a chance to revisit what I learned and apply the learning to my own world. I found it helpful, and a much more efficient way of learning than a quiz or a test, because a quiz or a test makes you remember 'who said what' but in this case, I had to think about 'why who said what' and 'how' it applies to the world now."

Developing transferable skills

Some students indicated that the flexibility of the assignments allowed them to develop certain skills that they could apply in other contexts. For example, students learned skills for reinforcing their learning of course concepts, by finding examples that illustrated key issues discussed in the course and within course readings. Furthermore, engaging in the process of choosing topics and finding relevant content provided students with practice in developing research skills: "[applying concepts discussed in class] to a reading… prepared me for conducting research and writing a dissertation."

Inclusion

Providing choice and flexibility in pursuing different topics provided students with the opportunity to explore topics and current events that personally resonated with them. In turn, having agency in selecting different topics to explore made students feel more invested in their learning and more included in the learning process: "[finding current events associated with the readings and theme of the week] was my favorite part of writing reflections. In my Week 4 reflection, I found an article on Korean American Christian women and learned so much through that one article. I never felt so included and heard, and I'm sure that I would have never found that article if it wasn't for deep diving into the theme."

Enjoyment

Finally, the flexibility of assignments was described by some students as a particularly enjoyable aspect of the class. This was felt even when students also found the assignments challenging, and outweighed any negative feelings associated with the difficulty of the assignments: "I think weekly reflection is not only homework, but also an exploratory process, because the knowledge learned in class is limited, and you can only learn it if you take the time to explore. In general, although this is a stressful class, the joy of exploration is greater than the stress."

Empowerment

Above all, the student reflections frequently conveyed empowerment by recognizing their growth in in relation to four primary areas: (1) their personal beliefs and perspectives; (2) their understanding of the course material; (3) their learning; and (4) their ability to use academic tools to support their personal, intellectual, and academic growth and/or to explain their previously held beliefs and understandings.

Growth in Relation to Previously Held Personal Beliefs and Perspectives

Through the comparison reflection exercise, students were able to recognize how their assumptions about personal beliefs (their own or others') had changed or grown over the course of the class. When examining their initial reflection in their final reflection, 64 percent of students highlighted previous statements they had made concerning their own beliefs and/or perceptions regarding the importance of religion and secularism in shaping their own lives as statements that they now disagreed with or were unsure about. More interestingly, students were also able to reflect on what they had learned, and how the learning experience allowed them to more critically evaluate how religion/secularism has influenced their lives and how these issues might influence others' lives as well. In particular, students frequently used emphatic or forceful descriptors when elaborating on their growth in relation to previously held personal beliefs and perspectives. For example, growth in this respect was described as "eye-opening," "mind blowing," and previously held beliefs were described as having been "turned upside down."

Growth in Relation to Previously Held Beliefs about the Course Material

In addition to personal growth, students also recognized their growth in understanding the course material and concepts (i.e., role of religion and secularism in shaping democracy and human rights, perceptions of race and ethnicity, understandings of gender and sexuality, and conflict and peacebuilding). Sixty four percent of students highlighted previous statements they had made concerning the role of religion in politics as statements that they now disagreed with or were unsure about. Furthermore, through their reflections, students elaborated on why they now disagreed with their previous statements, recognizing statements that mischaracterized relationships between religion and politics or that were overly simplistic in their framing of complex issues.

Growth in Relation to Learning

Strikingly, 91 percent of students recognized growth in their learning of the material from week to week, as well as over the course of the term, and felt empowered by discovering learning as a process. Students frequently reflected on how they hoped to change in the future as a result of the course: "I do believe that I need to instead become more open-minded in regards to whom I associate and become close with. Religious barriers have existed in my past as there were some significant distinctions, but there is a lot to learn from other religions and individuals." Also, students frequently expressed excitement in uncovering their learning, as well as in having the opportunity to continue to learn more about the themes and topics explored in the class: "I also want to learn more about and respect others' religions and spiritualities (both I knew about before this course and those I learned during this course)… Sharing my perspective was invigorating and piqued my interest in continuing my studies on these topics."

Using Academic Tools

Throughout the reflections, students discussed their growth in using academic tools to guide their learning process. Students recognized how their interpretation of real-world situations and theoretical framings of issues had evolved through the process of participating in course discussions, writing weekly reflections, reading/reviewing course materials, and identifying real world events. Students were able to apply theoretical course concepts to real world situations that they had uncovered through their media searches for current events. In addition, students used course texts (e.g., articles, podcasts) to bolster and support their arguments. Interestingly, when students did not disagree much with the points made in their initial reflection, they were able to use course texts and materials to support their initial interpretation and explain why their thinking had not changed. For example, one students said: "My response has not changed since Week 1. Again, referencing Kizito, there are clear indications as to how American politics has been affected by these issues. What is more important here is the way in which society has viewed these issues to be acceptable." Other students expressed that the course helped them develop skills in evaluating and interpreting academic articles as well as in conducting research.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that incorporating trauma-informed principles into course design could be an important avenue through which instructors can support students in their learning as well as bolster their capacity to succeed in other areas inside and outside of the classroom (e.g., engaging in difficult conversations, seeking out support, using transferable skills in other contexts, applying course content to their own lives). As such, using a trauma-informed design is another tool available to instructors to not only advance learning, but to be a part of the holistic and comprehensive support systems that undergraduate students increasingly need – especially in the context of growing mental health problems among undergraduate students (Lee, Jeong, & Kim, 2021) and collective trauma and anxieties (e.g., COVID-19, climate change, racial and economic inequality (American College Health Association, 2020; Pihkala, 2020; Correia et al., 2022).

As we demonstrate in this paper, the students noted the importance of not shying away from controversial and potentially traumatic topics and reflected on developing skills for engaging with one another in respectful dialogue. All of this said, the trauma-informed approach used in this course is not *only* for courses that deal with sensitive and controversial topics, as a trauma-informed approach addresses student trauma beyond the topics covered in a course. However, using this *Religion and Politics* course as our case study, we demonstrate that there are tools for instructors teaching similar topics on fostering an environment that encourages students to engage in respectful dialogue.

For instructors who seek to incorporate a trauma-informed approach to their course design, we emphasize the importance of empowering students, which can be done in several ways, as empowerment underlies other trauma-informed principles (Stephens, 2020). First, instructors should be intentional about showing care for their students by using a welcoming tone and pre-course surveys to collect information and get to know their students. This indicates to students that the instructor is actively listening to their needs and is willing to support them during the course as needed. Second, instructors can build trust through disclosing instructor positionality with students. Trust should be modelled from the instructor before asking students to engage in deep and sensitive dialogue; this also gives students a pathway of how to engage in difficult dialogues, especially if they have not learned those skills yet. Third, instructors should allow opportunities for choice within the course (e.g., choosing assignment modality, voting on the topic of one lesson). This allows students to be seen as knowledge-producers within the classroom and addresses inequities that render students

as mere recipients of information rather than active participants in a learning environment. Ultimately, we encourage instructors to be intentional in carving out opportunities for students to have voice and agency in their learning and model vulnerability and openness with students, especially when delving into contentious topics (despite being uncomfortable for instructors). There are numerous practices, policies, and facilitation techniques that embody trauma-informed principles. Though, importantly, these principles can be interpreted in different, innovative ways and can be applied in numerous contexts (Stephens, 2020).

Trauma-informed Principles as Mutually Reinforcing

We suggest that the intentional incorporation of all five principles underlying a trauma-informed informed approach contributed to aspects of each principle being amplified in students' reflections and rich descriptions of their experiences. We justify this contribution by drawing on existing research connecting students' learning experiences with trauma-informed pedagogy, power inequities, and feminist theory. In particular, we suggest that students reflecting all of these dimensions—in both distinct and overlapping ways—reinforces underlying notions that (1) each of these principles were directly experienced in some capacity and (2) that these principles are mutually reinforcing and determinant factors. This is consistent with pedagogy research suggesting that relationships exist between different trauma-informed principles. For example, Carello & Butler (2015) explored how dimensions of trauma-informed principles are interrelated factors contributing to students' experience as learners: when students feel powerless, they do not feel safe, and when students do not trust the instructor, they do not feel safe. Thus, elements of empowerment and trustworthiness may be necessary for cultivating safety. Without experiencing the former, students cannot experience the latter.

Carello & Butler (2014) recommend compassion and responsibility on behalf of the instructor, that instructors recognize that many students have histories of trauma, and that instructors integrate this into their educational practice, in order to cultivate an emotionally safe environment for students. Our findings suggest that these recommendations are determinant factors of a safe and trustworthy classroom space. The design of the course incorporated similar resources, and intentional care on behalf of the instructor. Within student reflections, we uncovered themes that demonstrated that students trusted the instructor and their peers, by engaging in the process of self-disclosure and open dialogue. In turn, these experiences contributed to themes of empowerment (e.g., recognizing expansion in their knowledge as a process of engaging in dialogue and reflection).

Our findings are also consistent with recent research on the interplay between classroom safety, trust, and collaboration. Qualities of instructors that support positive engagement and facilitated authentic classroom relationships included acceptance of where students are at, sensitivity, compassion, and empathy (Morgan, Pendergast, Brown, & Heck, 2015). Brunzell, Stokes, and Waters (2019) have echoed these sentiments more recently, arguing that instructor behavior that makes students feel that they are worthy of care and attention can facilitate the formation of classroom relationships. Our findings corroborate the idea that safety, trust, and collaboration are mutually reinforcing. Themes of safety, trust, and collaboration often appeared together in student reflections, where students spoke about engaging with their peers in a respectful and honest way, exploring difficult topics together, and sharing emotions with both their peers and the instructor.

Prior research has also explored the relationship between collaboration, trust, and empowerment. Institutionalized roles in society and educational practices often results in power imbalances between instructors and students (Mitra, 2008). For instance, level of expertise is an example of an asymmetry that exists between instructors and students (cf. Lave & Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation). Asymmetries in expertise are even *required* for learning

to take place (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). However, collaboration can help build trust, even when there is a risk of power imbalance (Arai et al., 2021; Sheriff et al., 2019). We saw this reflected in students' experiences of valuable conversations both with the instructor of the course, and with their peers, where despite the asymmetry in expertise, students felt like equal participants in their learning.

Furthermore, empowering individuals by helping them learn how to identify power structures and inequities can be beneficial for survivors of trauma (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999). In this context, power refers to "the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change through the ability to gain control over crucial material and nonmaterial resources" (Moser, 1989, p. 1815). Thus, recognition of power dynamics influences an individual's ability to make choices (Enns, 2011), which in turn can empower individuals (Kabeer 2001). In a classroom context, power brokers (e.g., instructors) can provide students with a voice in the classroom and choices regarding their education, by promoting self-advocacy skills and self-efficacy in relation to learning (Harper & Neubauer, 2021). We saw this reflected in students' experiences of choice, particularly in how the flexibility of assignments encouraged students to broaden their perspectives and develop their personal beliefs/beliefs about course material. We note that the latter was also typical of student experiences that reflected empowerment.

Limitations

Due to the methodology guiding our research, we are not able to infer causal relationships between the integration of trauma-informed course design principles and students' experiences of a trauma-informed approach. We also recognize that other factors may have contributed to students' experiences (e.g., a smaller class size, the teaching style of the instructor, the content explored in the course). However, we hope to have shown what is possible, when attention is paid to the design of a course that involves potentially traumatic topics. Furthermore, we have illuminated how teaching with attention to trauma-informed principles does not change the nature of the content explored, but changes *how* instructional techniques may be provided (Wright & Laurent, 2021).

Conclusion

We provide preliminary support that embedding trauma-informed principles into course design and facilitation can improve students' learning experiences and empowerment. Through student reflections, students demonstrated a recognition in their own learning potential and their personal and academic growth. In addition to learning the course material, students learned more about their peers, themselves, and engaging in difficult topics with people with divergent views and perspectives. By providing students with a safe space for discussion, tools for exploration, and choice in expression and investigation, students left the course with an accounting of their growth as well as tools for continual learning, reflection, and dialogue. Furthermore, our case study demonstrates potential for trauma-informed design to support and enhance student learning despite engaging with difficult, contentious, and potentially re-traumatizing topics and within a social context of collective trauma. Future research should explore the impact of trauma-informed design on courses that explore less inherently traumatic topics, but still recognize prevalence of trauma within the undergraduate students. In addition, we recommend a greater exploration of how designing and implementing trauma-informed courses impact experiences for instructors.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Week 1 and Final Student Reflection Questions.

Week 1 Reflection

Week 1 Reflection Prompt (500-750 words OR 5 minutes):

1. How significant has religion, spirituality, and/or secularism been in your personal life? Has it changed over time? What influence have your family/community/country of origin/ language/etc. had on your views?
2. In your view – is religion/spirituality/secularism:
    1. important in the US? (If you're from somewhere else, you can reflect on that context here.)
    2. important in the world (international politics)?
    3. becoming more or less important in the US and the world?
3. Has this week's sources raised new questions on the role of religion, spirituality, and/or secularism for you? How? And if not, why not? (refer to the Week 1 Roadmap)

Directions to upload:
(1) write your responses on the word processor of your choice and save the file as a .doc, .docx, or .pdf
OR (2) record your audio/video on a platform of your choice, and save the file in order to upload the media recording
Then click "Start Assignment" to "Choose File" to upload, include a note to me if you choose, and finally click "Submit Assignment."

Note about grading rubric: For this reflection, the *substance* of your response will not be graded. So long as you have answered all five questions, followed the word limits, and demonstrated some thought in your response, you will be given full credit. Please answer the questions as honestly as you feel comfortable doing so.

Final Reflection

Final Reflection Prompt (1,500 words or 10 minutes):

Directions:

Step 1: Copy & paste your Week 1 reflection from this course onto your final reflection document.
Step 2: As you are rereading your Week 1 reflection, color code your responses:

- red for statements you no longer agree with;
- green for statements you still agree with;
- blue for statements you're unsure about.

Step 3: Respond to the first four (4) reflection questions, which are almost identical to Week 1's questions. Each answer should have the following two parts and cite at least one class resource for each of the four questions.

- Part 1: Write a new 100-word response to the question *(you can answer before color-coding!)*

- Part 2: In an additional 150 words, using your reflection color-coding, answer: has your response changed since Week 1? If so, how? If not, why not? *(Be sure to mention how at least one reading/material/discussion has impacted your response)*

(If you submitted a video/audio file for your Week 1 reflection, you would need to have it transcribed. I can send you the transcription of your reflection – just email me. For the final submission, please submit your color-coded transcription and an audio/video file with your final reflection.)

Part One: Reflecting on changes from Week 1's responses (250 words each)

1. How significant has religion, spirituality, and/or secularism been in your personal life?
2. Based on your observations, how significant has religion, spirituality, and/or secularism been in domestic politics? *(This can be the US, or your own country of origin. Be sure to specify.)*
3. Based on your observations, how significant has religion, spirituality, and/or secularism been in international politics?
4. How do you think the futures of religion, spirituality, and/or secularism are changing in domestic politics, and/or international politics?

Part Two: Reflecting on the class as a whole (150 words each)

For the questions below, please be specific and reflect on relevant readings, lectures, class discussions, discussion boards, reflections, teaching method(s), peer comment(s)

1. What are you curious to know more about (what are some remaining questions) as a result of completing this course?
2. Did the readings/discussions/materials/assignments from this course enlarge/enhance your understandings of religion, spirituality, and/or secularism? If so, how? If not, why not? Explain with specifics.
3. How do you think what you have learned through the weekly reflections will stay with you beyond this course? *(Use these questions to help you: What was rewarding about the weekly reflections in this class? What was challenging? What was your favorite of the reflections?)*
4. Overall, what part of the course was most influential in changing or reaffirming your perceptions about religion, spirituality, and/or secularism? Explain with specifics.

Directions to upload:
(1) write your responses on the word processor of your choice and save the file as a .doc, .docx, or .pdf
OR (2) record your audio/video on a platform of your choice, and save the file in order to upload the media recording
Then click "Start Assignment" to "Choose File" to upload, include a note to me if you choose, and finally click "Submit Assignment."

Note about grading rubric: For this reflection, the *substance* of your response will not be graded. So long as you have answered all the questions, followed the word limits, and demonstrated some thought in your response, you will be given full credit. Please answer the questions as honestly as you feel comfortable doing so. (1 point per question; 2 points for Week 1 color-coding step)

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