

From Policy to Practice: Trauma-Informed Approaches to Student Attendance

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Abstract This article contributes to inclusive TPC pedagogical scholarship by using trauma-informed pedagogical (TIP) principles to study an under researched area: classroom attendance policies. Specifically, we treat instructors as technical communicators in the classroom and focus on how they design, implement, and enforce their attendance policies. Guided by Miriam Williams' (2020) conceptual framework for policy analysis, we conducted interviews with instructors at a local institution to identify that a variety of factors impact their decisions regarding attendance policy, from their teaching philosophy and course type to institutional contexts. The challenge of developing inclusive attendance policies coalesced to two themes across a spectrum: flexibility and accountability. We offer TIP principles to address these challenges and provide specific suggestions for how technical communicators can make change both in the classroom as teachers and in institutional policy development to create more inclusive attendance policies.

Keywords attendance policy, inclusive TPC pedagogy, policy development, trauma-informed pedagogy

A Student Story

A student both authors know has faced a recurring challenge throughout their academic journey: knowing how much to disclose to access support from their teachers. As an undergraduate, when their great-grandmother who had raised them after foster care passed away, they reached out for help managing coursework. One professor responded with a single sentence: *You should just drop the class*. The response did not even acknowledge the student's loss, making them

feel like an unimportant burden rather than a person worth supporting. This dismissal made future disclosures even harder.

In graduate school, the student struggled with self-harm but, fearing stigma, chose not to disclose this in an email informing their professor their first absence. The response was curt: they needed to *prioritize class* and that the absence would *affect their recommendation letter*. Once again, they felt that their well-being was secondary to academic expectations. Later, in another course, they informed a professor that their disability was preventing them from contributing to the week's online discussion board—the first assignment they had missed. The professor reprimanded them, insisting that their position as a disabled person made their *expertise on disability studies* that week *even more imperative*.

These experiences highlight a troubling reality. While many educators have flexibility in attendance policies, access to compassion often depends on disclosure. Yet disclosure itself is fraught. Teachers may say, *If I had known you were traumatized, I would have helped*. But students who have faced dismissal, judgment, or punishment for past disclosures are often retraumatized by the very act of asking for support. The expectation that students must expose their most personal struggles to receive basic grace reinforces the very trauma that hinders their ability to succeed.

Introduction

How can educators communicate attendance expectations without retraumatizing students? Attendance policies profoundly shape students' educational experiences, their sense of belonging, academic performance, and well-being. Yet rigid policies often punish those navigating trauma, reinforcing stress and disengagement.

Trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP) recognizes trauma's prevalence and seeks to support students rather than exacerbate harm. Research links Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to long-term health and behavioral impacts, including academic struggles (Felitti & Anda, 1998). More recent work (Venet, 2021) advocates for structural changes that support *all* students, not just those who disclose trauma. Attendance policies, then, are a critical site for trauma-informed reform: rather than enforcing rigid compliance, they should balance flexibility with accountability to foster learning without penalizing students for circumstances beyond their control.

For technical and professional communication (TPC) educators, attendance policies are also a site of research and intervention. As technical communicators both designing policies in their classrooms and shaping institutional guidelines, TPC scholars can advocate for trauma-informed approaches that foster inclusivity.

To explore these issues, we conducted a qualitative study with instructors in the English department at a research-intensive public university in the Mountain West region. Our study examines:

- How do instructors design attendance policies and why?
- How are attendance policies communicated and implemented with students?
- What challenges and tensions arise in designing and enforcing attendance policies?
- How aware are instructors of trauma's impact on student attendance and learning?

Our findings reveal that instructors struggle to codify flexibility while maintaining accountability. Using a trauma-informed lens, we argue that TIP provides a valuable framework for navigating these tensions. Attendance policies acknowledge trauma and prioritize learning over punishment foster more equitable, supportive classrooms. We conclude with recommendations for educators and institutions on crafting policies that balance care and accountability, ensuring all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Literature Review

Trauma and Technical Communication Pedagogies

Trauma disproportionately affects marginalized populations, making it essential to consider within inclusive and social justice-oriented pedagogies in technical and professional communication (TPC). Scholars have challenged the notion of TPC as objective and value-neutral by incorporating accessibility, cultural rhetorics, and social justice principles (Colton & Walton, 2015; Edwards, 2018, "Race and the workplace"; Frost, 2014; Haas, 2012; Melonçon, 2016; Palmeri, 2006; Scott, Longo, & Wills, 2006). Efforts to create inclusive classrooms have addressed accessibility through universal design (Hitt, 2018; Walters, 2010) and racial equity (Edwards, 2018, "Inclusive practices"; Shelton, 2020), emphasizing the embodied experiences of students and instructors. However, less attention has been given to how trauma impacts student learning in TPC classrooms.

TIP offers a crucial framework for bridging this gap. Scholars in rhetoric and writing studies have explored how writing classrooms can foster healing (Day, 2019; Tayles, 2021; Valentino, 2021), but TPC has yet to fully integrate trauma-aware approaches. Imad (2022) defined trauma as experiences that challenge one's sense of safety, support, and belonging, including systemic and generational trauma. TIP extends beyond recognizing individual traumatic events to addressing the structural conditions like systemic trauma from racism, childhood adversity, and poverty that impact students' ability to learn.

Trauma Informed Principles

To guide our analysis, we applied trauma-informed care principles from SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) and scholarly reinterpretations (see Table 1). By incorporating TIP into TPC, we aim to foster more equitable, supportive learning environments. The following sections synthesize scholarly definitions of each principle, while a more detailed discussion on how we applied some of these principles in our deductive coding round is provided in the Methods section.

Table 1. Connections among different definitions of trauma-informed pedagogy

Trauma Informed Principles		
SAMHSA (CDC, 2022)	Imad (2022)	Venet (2022)
Safety	Safety (emphasizing transparency and trustworthiness)	Predictability
Trustworthiness		
Peer support	Community (highlighting peer supporting and collaboration)	Connection
Collaboration and mutuality		
Empowerment, voice, and choice	Empowerment (focusing on providing choice and encouraging self-advocacy)	Empowerment
Cultural historical and gender issues	Cultural sensitivity at the center of each principle	
	Meaning (centering on identification of goals and purpose)	Flexibility

Safety and Trustworthiness

Trauma-informed classrooms establish predictability and transparency to foster trust (Imad, 2022; Venet, 2022). Trauma often results from unpredictability, making inconsistent policies—such as unclear attendance rules—particularly harmful. However, calls for “safety” must be nuanced, as Davidson (2021) warns that prioritizing comfort over critical engagement can reinforce inequities. Instead, trauma-informed educators cultivate structured, secure environments where students can take intellectual risks without retraumatization.

Peer Support, Collaboration, and Mutuality

Social connection reduces the isolating effects of trauma (Friedman et al., 2022). Rather than treating peer support and collaboration as separate, Imad (2022) and Venet (2022) emphasize that building meaningful relationships through group work, shared experiences, and representation in course materials help students feel valued. Joy and playfulness also contribute to classroom bonds, reinforcing engagement and trust (Venet, 2022).

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Trauma can create a sense of powerlessness, making student agency and choice essential (Venet, 2022). While SAMHSA defines empowerment as fostering self-advocacy, systemic barriers often undermine this ideal. Disability accommodation processes, for instance, require repeated disclosure and navigation of bureaucratic hurdles (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022; Dolmage, 2017). Trauma-informed approaches must go beyond encouraging advocacy by structurally supporting student agency and incorporating flexible policies without demanding disclosures and formal procedures.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Cultural, historical, and gender issues permeate all aspects of trauma-informed pedagogy (Imad, 2022). Trauma is not experienced in isolation—it is shaped by systemic inequities related to race, gender, disability, and class, (Thompson & Marsh, 2022), but also by personal histories that do not fit easily into dominant frameworks of marginalization. Socially just approaches to TPC pedagogy must resist oversimplifying whose trauma is "legitimate" or most in need of redress. While it is crucial to acknowledge structural oppression, a trauma-informed approach does not assume that only visibly marginalized students experience harm. Trauma cuts across identities, affecting students in ways that may be systemic, personal, or both.

Thus, trauma-informed education aligns with social justice pedagogy not by prioritizing specific narratives but by critically examining how positionality and privilege is relational and contextual (Walton et al., 2018). This requires moving beyond checklist-style inclusivity efforts to create learning environments where all students feel supported, regardless of whether their struggles are readily recognized as marginalization based on racial, gender, and cultural identities.

Meaning and Flexibility

Beyond SAMHSA's framework, meaning and flexibility play critical roles in trauma-informed learning. Imad (2022) argues that students engage more deeply when coursework connects to personal, professional, or social goals. Venet (2022) warns

that rigid structures can alienate trauma-affected students, making flexibility—within a predictable framework—key to fostering resilience.

Attendance Policies as Technical Communication

Researching pedagogical policies can also extend policy research in the field of TPC. In this body of scholarship, researchers have focused on not only the language of policies (Edenfield, 2018; Harlow, 2015; Jones et al., 2012; Lawrence et al., 2019; Petersen & Moeller, 2016; Stevens, 2022) but also the processes of developing and implementing policies (Card, 2020; Griggs, 2007; Thatcher, 2000; Williams, 2009; Williams & James, 2008; Workman et al., 2021). Aligning with these scholars, we see policies as rhetorical whose design, implementation, and evaluations require negotiations among multiple stakeholders in complex situations. As Williams (2022) pointed out, policy development should be treated as a technological process wherein technical communicators can identify sites of inquiry and intervention to design more inclusive policies and communicate and implement them in ways that are more equitable and accountably to the communities the policies serve.

In this article, we see educators and instructors as technical communicators in that they must communicate complex and specialized information to audiences who are not familiar with such content. If we understand technical communicators as "symbolic analysts" (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2013), then we can treat instructors as technical communicators when they engage in activities such as syllabi design, course policy development, etc. Doing so, we join the scholarly conversations that treat academic practices as user experience design practices (Crane & Cargile Cook, 2022; Jones, 2018; Thominet, 2024). In these studies, researchers have treated students as end-users of course documents such as syllabi and grading systems where they have valuable expert knowledge to share. In arguing for user-centered design approaches to teaching, they effectively treat instructors as technical communicators.

Others have treated course documents as critical tools for "decenter[ing] privileged identities and disrupt[ing] existing oppressive systems as a pedagogical practice" (Hatcher & Gabriel, 2024, p. 327). Specifically in this research, Gabriel has shared the example of their Accountability Policy, designed "to interrogate and subvert socially constructed notions perpetuated by white supremacy" (p. 333) by modeling their own professional ethos as a form of relational accountability and by inviting students to consider how they held themselves accountable to the class community as a form of professionalism. We resonate with Gabriel that course policies should not be used to mold students into a certain exclusionary type of body, but rather that they reflect values of the instructor and can set tones for the class that may reinforce or challenge oppressive systems.

Our study extends this body of scholarship by examining how teachers design and implement course policies, specifically attendance policies. While the teachers who participated in our study were not all teachers of technical and professional communication, we argue that this study has implications for course policy development for all instructors including technical communication course and curriculum designers. It also illustrates how technical communication theories and frameworks such as Miriam Williams' conceptual framework for policy research, can contribute to pedagogical practices and institutional policy development. Using public policy issues related to racial injustice and gun control, Williams (2022) developed a "PRS conceptual framework" for technical and professional communication researchers that "requires an understanding of the **policy** development process in practice, the **role** of technical communicators as advocate for stakeholders in public policy writing, and the traditional and emerging **sites** for conducting our studies" (p. 34-35). To operationalize this framework, Williams explained that researchers should first identify which stage of development of the policy the research takes place, from identifying problems to evaluating policy implementation. Then, researchers should identify the role of TPC in the policy issue including how technical communicators can "contribute to different stages of the public policy development process;" and how they can collect and analyze data in order to make suggestions for "improvement to documents, design, and processes" (p. 35). Researchers should also identify the stakeholders we want to advocate for as well as "ethical and social justice frameworks we work within" (p. 35). Finally, the researchers can identify the sites of inquiry where we can find answers to these questions. While Williams' framework was developed for working with public policy issues, we find it helpful in analyzing policy issues in other contexts.

Research on attendance policy from other fields tend to focus on investigating the correlations between attendance policies and students' academic achievements (as measured/reflected by grades) in the class, motivated by the debate on the importance of attendance policy (Credé et al., 2010) and students' perceptions of attendance policies (Chenneville & Jordan, 2008; Friedman et al., 2001; Persky et al., 2014; Welsen, 2022). What's missing in these often quantitative and review studies is more qualitative examinations of how instructors develop and implement their attendance policies. Treating instructors as technical communicators who need to consider multiple factors to design and implement a policy can reveal more in-depth insights on ways attendance policy can impact student learning. Using Williams' framework, we treat instructors playing multiple roles related to attendance policies, from designing it, to communicating about it, and to implementing it. Throughout the process, they have to consider various stakeholders across the sites of their classrooms and their institutions. This

framework provides a methodological guidance to our specific data collection methods. In the next section, we detail our research design.

Methods

Data Collection

This exploratory qualitative study (IRB #13663) involved interviews to identify patterns in faculty attendance policy design and implementation (Hayhoe & Brewer, 2020). Using a stratified sampling technique (Geisler & Swarts, 2019), we recruited ten English department instructors at a research-intensive public university in the Mountain West, ensuring variation in teaching experience and rank. Participants—lecturers, assistant professors, and full professors—had a minimum of five years of teaching experience and taught courses ranging from introductory composition to upper-division literature and technical communication. Adjuncts and graduate instructors were excluded to focus on those with sustained teaching experience. All names in this study are pseudonyms.

Faculty were recruited via departmental listservs and direct emails. Each participated in a 30- to 90-minute Zoom interview conducted by Author 1. Before the interview, the participants provided past and current attendance policies. Semi-structured interviews incorporated these documents, with questions exploring policy rationale, implementation, enforcement, and external influences (see Appendix 1 for the list of interview questions).

Guided by Williams' (2022) framework for policy research and our research questions, our interview questions focused on:

- Identifying policy problems and stakeholders
- Collecting historical and current policy information
- Understanding policy implementation, enforcement, and compliance
- Evaluating policies and their effectiveness

Unlike Williams' (2022) original framework, which examines policies as external structures, our study considered instructors as both policy designers and communicators. While we did not explicitly ask about trauma-informed pedagogy, our analysis identified whether and how these principles were present in their policies.

Data Analysis

We applied a thematic coding approach (Saldaña, 2009), moving iteratively from transcripts to categorized themes and refining them for consistency. The first and second rounds of coding were inductive, answering the first three research questions. In the third round of coding, we took a deductive approach by applying pre-established trauma-informed pedagogical principles to our data to identify

whether and how participants adopted these principles in their attendance policies. For member checking, participants were invited to review the completed research article before formal peer review to ensure accurate representation of their perspectives.

First-Round Coding

Author 1 initially coded transcripts and policies using Hayhoe & Brewer’s (2020) definition of coding by simultaneously segmenting and organizing the data in the smallest chunks. Author 1 identified verbs that signified actions or decisions in attendance policy design and segmented the data according to the topical chain associated with the verb (Geisler & Swarts, 2019). These were categorized according to Williams’ (2022) framework, linking each design rationale decision to external factors, stakeholders, and policy language. Author 2 then reviewed and validated categorizations, adjusting as needed.

Table 2. Data organization

William’s (2022) Stages of Policy Development	Our Coding Category	Reasoning
Problem	Design/Developmental Rationale	Each design decision was analyzed through a single, core design rationale, which was then connected to all relevant external factors, challenges, and policy language. This allowed us to capture the full context and rationale of the design decision.
Stakeholders	Stakeholders Considered	For each design decision, we identified all relevant stakeholders the teachers named as influencing or being considered in the design process.
Proposed policies History Current policy	Proposed future improvements External factors impacting policy design Policy language reflecting these elements	Here we captured the stages of policy design by recording the historical context, current policy language, and any proposed future changes associated with the rationale behind each decision.
Implementation and regulation	How the attendance policy was implemented and enforced	Implementation was treated as a separate dimension in a second excel sheet. We linked each attendance

	<p>Rationale for specific implementation</p> <p>External factors impacting implementation</p> <p>Challenges in implementation</p> <p>Proposed future improvements to implementation</p> <p>Policy language reflecting these elements</p>	<p>policy implementation action and linked it to its associated rationale for those choices, external factors influencing implementation, and any challenges faced.</p> <p>Coding policy language and implementation separately helped us identify discrepancies between how policies were written and how they were enacted, revealing the hidden knowledge students need to navigate attendance policies.</p>
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To refine our categories, we transitioned from spreadsheet analysis to sticky-note coding, where both researchers iteratively coded, adjusting codes and categories based on emerging patterns (see Table 3). By the end of the first round, our coding structure included:

Table 3. First-round coded categories

Refined Category	Description
Policy Language & Design	How attendance was defined and evaluated, whether it was graded or ungraded, penalty- vs. reward-based approaches, and enforcement methods.
Implementation & Student Interactions	How instructors introduced attendance policies, engaged in conversations about attendance, and assessed student participation through proof of learning or feedback.
Rationale	Teaching philosophies, course objectives, expectations of rigor, workforce preparation, and beliefs about why students miss class.

Impacting factors	Institutional policies, class type, instructor background, student behaviors, and external influences such as COVID-19 and technology.
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Second-Round of Coding: Identifying Themes

In this stage, we examined the challenges instructors faced in designing and implementing attendance policies and identified the themes of flexibility and accountability. While many participants shared ways they incorporated flexibility into their attendance policy, whether in policy language or in implementation, they also noted accountability as an important rationale for attendance because of the expectations placed on students and instructors from institutions and their own teaching philosophies. Challenges thus arose as instructors had to balance expectations on academic rigor as linked to attendance and students’ own lived realities, which often involved navigating issues of trust, mental health, trauma, etc. Instructors also had to navigate their own lived experiences, teaching philosophies and institutional policies to balance their flexibility on attendance policies.

Third-Round Coding: Applying the Trauma-Informed Pedagogy (TIP) Framework

Using common TIP principles—safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment—we analyzed how instructors enacted trauma-informed practices, addressing our last research question. Unlike mutually exclusive coding (Geisler & Swarts, 2019), we allowed actions to be categorized under multiple TIP principles when appropriate. To maintain focus on implementation rather than intention, we coded only concrete policy actions, not instructors' stated rationales. For instance, if a policy allowed students to miss class for illness, we coded it under safety, as it contributed to classroom well-being. This approach aligns with trauma-informed care, which prioritizes enacted practices over abstract beliefs.

A limitation of our research study is that we did not collect student participants to verify how the attendance policy implementations were received. Therefore, some of the TIP categories, like mutuality (CDC, 2022) or meaning (Imad, 2022) were not coded for because we were unable to identify how students responded to these policies. We also didn’t code for flexibility (Venet, 2022) as it already emerged as a theme in our second round of coding. Since cultural, historical, and gender factors are woven into every TIP principle (Imad, 2022; Thompson & Marsh, 2022), we categorized instances of teachers acknowledging these factors' impact on attendance under relevant TIP categories such as safety or trust.

Therefore, the following coding categories were used deductively by both researchers who coded the segmented data together:

Table 4. TIP coding categories.

TIP Coding Category	Definition
Safety	Encompassing both physical, emotional, and social dimensions of safety
Trust	Focusing on transparency in policy implementation and trust-building actions like how a teacher informed their students of the attendance policy
Choice	Offering students choice in how attendance policies are implemented like alternative assignments for class participation
Collaboration	Fostering a classroom community or collaboration between teachers and students.
Empowerment	Promoting self-advocacy

By triangulating TIP categories with our second-round themes, we observed how, in navigating flexibility and accountability in their attendance policies, participants intentionally or unintentionally applied trauma-informed principles or not.

Results

In this section, we start by illustrating how participants balanced flexibility and accountability in their attendance policy design and implementation. While we discuss these two themes separately, they are closely intertwined, as accountability can be seen as a mechanism to set boundaries for flexibility. Finally, we discuss whether and how our participants' approaches to policy implementation reflected trauma-informed pedagogical principles, the results of our third round of coding.

Flexibility in the Classroom

Our participants all had some form of student-centered teaching philosophy that required them to recognize a rigid policy would not best serve students. Further, external factors like class type offered different affordances and constraints on how flexible a teacher could be with attendance. The strategies they employed for enacting flexibility include:

- Allowing a set number of absences without penalty
- Accepting alternate assignments for missed classes
- Providing options for remote attendance when possible
- Clearly communicating policies and limits around flexibility

Participants often used policy to initiate a conversation with students and generally offered some degree of flexibility due to good will toward the students. Marianne

said they reiterated the flexibility in their policy when they had a tough time in their life to remind students to take mental or physical health days for themselves. Others use the maximum number of "free" absences to trigger a larger conversation about participation and learning objectives, reminding the students most affected by the policy of the parameters surrounding absences. Some teachers explained in their policy what they wanted to see in emails requesting absences. One teacher, Blake, set the boundary that they would not go over class material over email but would during office hours.

During COVID-19, teachers had to invent alternative ways students could learn other than synchronous classes. Even after the return to in-person classes, this led to some teachers implementing certain activities students could do to "make up" an absence. Even then, there were usually special cases that required a teacher to either fail a student or grant them additional flexibility by offering make-up assignments not outlined in the policy. Many teachers said they were more willing to offer flexibility if a student was engaged and willing to show they had completed the learning objectives.

Nevertheless, some participants harbored skepticism, viewing student absences through a lens of poor judgment or entitlement. For instance, one instructor might readily accept a student's reason for missing class, acknowledging the importance of personal well-being, while another might challenge the validity of the excuse, suspect dishonesty and require proof. One participant, Sarah, expressed that students often lied to them about why they missed class and she had to "call them on their lies."

However, some of our participants recognized that monitoring and scrutinizing students' absences infringes upon their autonomy. They argued demanding proof or challenging students' sincerity erodes the trust essential for fostering a supportive learning environment. However, acknowledging that some students do lie about their absences adds complexity to this discussion. Instructors often need to help students develop better judgment about when missing class is appropriate. However, how this guidance is delivered matters. Striking a balance between holding students accountable and treating them with empathy is crucial in maintaining both student integrity and a supportive classroom environment with a foundation of trust between teacher and student, especially if we consider how certain approaches to flexibility can marginalize students, such as those with mental health challenges.

Finally, an important justification for limited flexibility in our data is that participants wanted to better prepare students for the workplace. Sage described a tricky situation where one student would consistently need flexibility with attendance from semester to semester, and if the student did extra work, they

were willing to give it. However, when the student attempted to complete their student-internship, the job could not offer that flexibility, and therefore the student did not receive a recommendation from their employer. The instructor in this situation wanted to offer flexibility where they could but wondered if they were doing their students a disservice by not being transparent about the workforce's limitations on attendance accommodations. This challenge illustrates how accountability serves as a constraint on flexibility.

Accountability in the Classroom

Instructors who offer flexibility in their attendance policy often use accountability as a justification in that they want students to take responsibility for their learning. Our data revealed that accountability can refer to a variety of things: the instructor being accountable to the students; the instructor being accountable to the institution; students being accountable to themselves and their own learning; and students being accountable to the class community, including the following strategies:

- Communicating with students about any barriers or challenges they may be facing that could impact their attendance or participation.
- Designing classroom activities that emphasize community-engaged learning
- Offering multiple modes of engagement in the class, including group discussion, text-chat features, or asynchronous class involvement
- Asking students to reflect on their own engagement
- Checking in mid-semester

A teacher's responsibility to the students can include creating a safe and welcoming environment in the classroom. For example, Bailey explained to the students that because the teacher is accountable to the students to be there and prepared, the students are also accountable to be there and prepared. However, it's imperative to critically examine this notion of accountability. Teachers are remunerated by the institution to fulfill their teaching duties, which inherently places them in a position of responsibility towards their students. In contrast, students who are paying for their education are not subject to the same structural accountability.

Some framed student accountabilities in terms of being accountable to themselves and to each other in the learning community, including the teacher and other students, reflecting a socio-cultural view of learning. For example, Sarah had students complete an activity at the beginning of the semester in class where students must work together to put together a puzzle, emphasizing the importance of community in the classroom. English and writing courses are often discussion-based and many of our participants emphasized that if students are not engaging, then learning cannot happen in the classroom. While participants like Sage and

Sarah emphasized the importance of community in their classrooms by defining engagement as "participatory" and collaborative, they still didn't offer clear evidence of this expectation within their attendance policies.

Most instructors agreed that the institutional attendance policy is the bottom line for accountability. Sarah even explained that they liked the institutional policy to be the "bad guy" rather than the teacher be the enforcer of attendance penalties. However, there can be inconsistencies with the institutional policy. Aiden explained that during the uncertainty of attendance policies in the midst of COVID, the Disability Resource Center told them that students should not miss more than 50% of the class, which was significantly different than the institutional policy that a student should not miss more than 20% of the class. Also, the institutional policy stated that both "excused" and "unexcused" absences should not exceed 20%. Most teachers explained they hated playing the "excused" absence game. Further, if both excused and unexcused absences count toward the 20% maximum, then the importance of the distinction is lost. Not only that, but author 1 had been asked by athletics coordinators to be flexible with the 20% maximum number of absences.

While offering alternative assignments can be a mechanism of flexibility for attendance, it can also be understood as a way to keep students accountable. But these sorts of alternative assignments often take a great deal of labor on the teacher's part. However, how can a student clearly communicate their engagement? Some students might think the email in their absence asking, "what did I miss?" shows their engagement, whereas many teachers would say it demonstrates the opposite. This sort of "proof of engagement" is imperative for policies that do not outline penalties.

Trauma Informed Pedagogy, Flexibility, and Accountability

Choice Constrained by Empowerment

Some teachers discussed flexibility in terms of deadlines and curriculum content, but their experiences revealed a tension between offering choice and fostering student empowerment.

For example, Aiden increased flexibility by allowing all deadlines—including attendance make-up work—to be due at the end of the semester. This was coded under the TIP principle of "Choice" because it maximized student autonomy over their coursework. However, Aiden questioned whether this approach was truly beneficial, as many students procrastinated and found themselves overwhelmed at the end of the term. This concern was coded under "Empowerment" because it highlighted a key issue: while flexibility grants students more control, it does not necessarily equip them with the skills to manage that control effectively.

Similarly, Dakota initially implemented a “choose your own adventure” teaching model, allowing students to decide which aspects of the curriculum they wanted to focus on. However, they eventually abandoned this approach, believing that as the instructor, they had a better understanding of the subject and the skills students needed to develop. Dakota framed this shift not as a limitation of choice, but as a way to empower students by guiding them toward informed decision-making.

These examples illustrate that while flexibility in choice can enhance student agency, it does not inherently lead to better learning outcomes. When coding these approaches under TIP principles, we argue that unrestricted choice can sometimes hinder empowerment rather than foster it. True empowerment requires direction and scaffolding, ensuring that flexibility is paired with the tools students need to make informed, effective choices. Additionally, when students reach their maximum number of absences, teachers like Blake use this moment as an opportunity for collaboration, inviting the student into a conversation about how to best support their continued participation. This reinforces the idea that flexibility is not just about providing options but also about ensuring that students feel empowered to use them. Like Hatcher & Gabriel (2024) argued, this strategy of empowerment could help students develop their own sense of professionalism and accountability to the class community, instead of perpetuating dominant ideas of learning that marginalize diverse bodily experiences.

Choice Constrained by Trust

One common method of increasing flexibility in attendance policies is offering a set number of “free” absences without penalty. Blake, for example, framed these as “sick” days, both mental and physical, which we coded under the TIP principle of “safety.” This policy acknowledges that students should not be forced to choose between their health and their grades and contributes to a safer classroom environment, particularly for immuno-compromised students and students who have experienced trauma. Additionally, we coded this under “Choice” because the free absences model allows students to exercise choice in deciding when they need to step away from class.

However, flexibility alone does not eliminate the structural and emotional barriers students face when seeking accommodations. Many students hesitate to reach out when they surpass their allotted absences, fearing that their reasons will not be believed or considered legitimate. Many of our participants described the frequent distressing emails from students who disclosed deeply personal tragedies in excruciating detail that some believed to be an overcompensation for their fear of being dismissed.

Blake addressed this issue by building trust early in the semester. On the first day, they required students to email an introduction, outlining their learning needs. We coded this under “trust” because it normalizes communication between students and their instructor before a crisis occurs. By responding to each email personally,

Blake signaled to students that their concerns will be heard and respected, reducing the emotional burden of reaching out later in the semester.

This model highlights a crucial limitation of flexibility: without trust, students may not feel safe enough to use the options available to them. While free absences provide choice, they are most effective when paired with proactive trust-building strategies that help students feel comfortable advocating for their needs.

Hard Conversations and Accountability

As mentioned before, one of the challenges our participants faced is determining when and how to tell a student they have reached the limits of flexibility. Often, this comes down to accountability—helping students recognize when they may no longer be able to succeed in the course and guiding them toward the best course of action.

For some instructors, this meant having difficult conversations about whether a student should drop the class. Sage described the importance of framing such discussions with care and compassion. When advising a student to drop, they emphasize that it may simply not be the right time for the student to take the course, but that they could return when they are more prepared. This approach was also coded under "Choice" and "Empowerment" because it reinforces that students still had control over their educational journey and were not being shut out permanently. Unlike Sage's compassionate framing, the blunt one-sentence email received by the student in our opening narrative would not empower the student or help them understand their choices. By framing difficult conversations as acts of guidance rather than rejection, instructors can ensure that students feel supported—even when the outcome is dropping the course.

Hidden Mechanisms for Accountability and Flexibility

Offering flexibility without clearly codifying them can create both logistical and pedagogical challenges. The lack of transparency can diminish the benefits of flexibility.

One reason for this challenge is practicality. Attendance policies are designed for broad application, while extensive flexibility is typically reserved for exceptional circumstances. Codifying every possible accommodation could significantly increase an instructor's workload and limit their ability to make case-by-case decisions. As a result, many teachers preferred to exercise flexibility informally, adjusting policies based on individual student needs.

However, lack of codification can also create barriers for students. When students are unaware that flexibility exists or unclear about when it applies, they may struggle to advocate for themselves or feel uncertain about their options. For example, Morgan offered flexibility by withholding a codified number of "free"

absences from students. Instead of stating a fixed limit in the syllabus, Morgan determined when a student had exceeded an acceptable number of absences and then informed them that they should drop the class. Students who are unaware of the limit may be surprised when they are suddenly told to withdraw, making the conversation more difficult. For this reason, we coded these actions as issues of trust and empowerment in addition to choice. A student who does not know that their instructor is willing to be flexible may assume that no flexibility is available, limiting their ability to take proactive action in managing their attendance.

Some instructors managed this challenge by signaling flexibility in their syllabi. For example, some included a statement encouraging students who were struggling with attendance to speak with them directly. Others explicitly listed acceptable reasons for absences, such as physical health issues and, less frequently, mental health concerns. By codifying some level of flexibility, instructors provided students with clearer expectations while maintaining room for case-by-case decisions.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that designing and implementing attendance policies require instructors to engage with the tensions between flexibility and accountability by considering the principles of trauma-informed pedagogy: safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Instructors must reflect on their own teaching philosophies, particularly their relationships with students and the kind of learning environments they want to foster. While individual instructors play a key role in applying trauma-informed pedagogical (TIP) principles, systemic change at the institutional level is also necessary. Institutional policies should align with the values of social justice and cultural studies-oriented technical and professional communication (TPC) pedagogies, which emphasize the importance of lived experience. However, this alignment requires nuance—while valuing students' lived experiences is central to inclusive pedagogy, learning objectives must still be met.

Social justice pedagogies emphasize the need to respond to the needs of the structurally disadvantaged (Walton et al., 2018) while trauma-informed approaches extend this argument by arguing trauma is often a consequence of systemic cultural, historical, and gender issues (Thompson and Marsh, 2022). Applying TIP principles to attendance policies answers this call for inclusivity by acknowledging and redressing these barriers. For example, ensuring safety and fostering trust and collaboration between instructor and students can help students recognize their experiences are valued in the class. Through offering student choice and empowering them to advocate for themselves, instructors can also amplify their experiences, especially if they experience other forms of marginalization. However, individual instructors' practices can only go so far in navigating these challenges. Like other advocates for socially just pedagogies, we also argue for systemic changes that can further enhance policy transparency and challenge hegemonic ideas about students.

This section explores the implications of our study for instructors and institutional policymaking. At the instructor level, we discuss how concepts like the window of tolerance and unconditional positive regard can help mitigate the burden of students having to articulate trauma to access flexibility. At the institutional level, we argue for codifying mental health accommodations and developing support to help students transition into professional environments with varying flexibility policies. In particular, we highlight the role of technical writers in institutional policy development. Although instructors already function as technical writers—as seen in the varied attempts teachers made at defining "participation"—they can also incorporate usability testing into attendance policies—for instance, by actively seeking and incorporating student feedback. A significant portion of instructors' policy expertise remains unspoken and derives from accumulated teaching experience rather than structured, formal training. Technical communicators can make this work explicit by examining institutional policies through frameworks like Williams' (2010), identifying how flexibility and accountability are shaped by various factors and thus help institutions evaluate and improve upon their policies, including attendance policies and others.

Instructor Recommendations

A key principle of trauma-informed care is resisting re-traumatization by setting clear, realistic expectations while remaining flexible. Applying principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment helps balance accountability with student well-being. Many of our participants were aware of cultural issues impacting attendance—disability, family obligations, financial constraints, and other systemic barriers—yet traditional attendance policies often fail to accommodate these challenges. By layering these principles with other socially just and cultural-studies oriented pedagogical practices, instructors can operationalize practices that truly empower traumatized students. In this section, we offer specific suggestions for how to operationalize this in the context of attendance policy design.

The Window of Tolerance

If we recognize that cultural and economic factors shape students' access to education, we must also acknowledge that trauma affects their ability to learn. The concept of the window of tolerance helps illustrate why attendance flexibility should not depend on students' ability to articulate their struggles. Developed by Dan Siegel, the window of tolerance describes an individual's optimal emotional state for learning (Hershler et al., 2021). However, trauma can narrow this window, making it easier for them to enter hyper-aroused (anxious, overwhelmed) or hypo-aroused (numb, disengaged) states (Hershler et al., 2021).

For example, if a student has recently lost a loved one, their window might be narrowed for months or years. A seemingly minor stressor—such as their sibling eating the last bagel—could push them into a dysregulated state. That student may not be able to articulate why they are struggling or to recognize that their reaction

stems from trauma. Expecting students to justify their absences or emotional states places an unnecessary burden on them and can contribute to re-traumatization.

To make attendance policies more accessible and trauma-informed, instructors can:

- Educate students about the window of tolerance and provide a simple way for them to communicate distress without disclosing personal details. For example, Author 1 tells students they can simply say they are "out of their window of tolerance" if they need support.
- Codify mental health as a valid reason for absence in syllabi, reinforcing that emotional well-being is prioritized.
- Codify paths to flexibility like make-up assignments and alternative participation methods in policy so students know that flexibility is an option.
- Hold non-confrontational check-ins with students who frequently struggle, focusing on collaborative problem-solving.
- Avoid punitive attendance tracking that force students to relive trauma in order to receive accommodations.

Unconditional Positive Regard

Another method for creating accessible, transparent attendance policies is applying unconditional positive regard—a principle that values students' inherent worth regardless of their struggles. Trauma often creates a sense of unworthiness, leading individuals to believe they deserve negative consequences. According to Venet (2021), teachers frequently adopt a deficit mindset, seeing struggling students as lacking and positioning themselves as "saviors." This mindset often results in lowered expectations rather than genuine support. Instead, trauma-informed pedagogy emphasizes trust, empowerment, and collaborative learning.

To integrate unconditional positive regard into attendance policies, instructors can:

- Separate attendance from student worth by reinforcing that a student's value in the classroom is not dependent on perfect attendance.
- Offer alternative forms of engagement (e.g., discussion boards, reflective assignments) for students who cannot be physically present.
- Communicate expectations clearly and transparently so students understand their options without fear of punitive consequences.
- Create space for student autonomy by allowing flexibility while maintaining clear learning objectives.

By incorporating trauma-informed principles into attendance policies, instructors can foster a learning environment that prioritizes student well-being while upholding accountability. These adjustments extend social justice pedagogy beyond theoretical discussions, embedding equity into the structure of the classroom. In addition, instructors can implement usability testing methods to help develop their attendance policies, such as asking students to interpret the attendance policy at

the beginning of class to then revise it based on student feedback as well as surveying students throughout the semester about their needs for attendance flexibility and suggestions for alternate ways of class engagement.

Programmatic and University Policy Recommendations

A trauma-informed approach to policy design acknowledges that rigid, one-size-fits-all policies can be retraumatizing (Reid, 2021; Venet, 2021). While individual instructors can implement flexible attendance policies, institutional structures must support them in doing so. Universities must take an active role in codifying mental health accessibility, preparing students to navigate workplace policies, and fostering systemic change. Technical writers can play a key role in this process by designing policies, conducting research, and developing faculty resources that prioritize accessibility from the outset.

Codifying Flexibility and Accountability in Attendance Policies

Trauma-informed pedagogy recognizes that students may struggle with attendance for a variety of reasons, many of which are not formally documented or easily disclosed. Requiring medical or disability documentation assumes a level of institutional trust and financial access that many students do not have (Dolmage, 2017), often reinforcing stigma and retraumatizing those seeking support. To address this, universities must codify mental health as a legitimate reason for excused absences while ensuring that accountability measures are clearly defined and equitably applied. Like a student with a broken bone who may require temporary accommodations, students experiencing mental health challenges should be able to self-certify absences without excessive bureaucratic hurdles. However, this flexibility must be integrated within institutional frameworks that maintain course integrity and funding compliance. For example, if in-person instruction is a funding requirement, institutions must develop policies that accommodate mental health needs without compromising essential attendance requirements.

To achieve this balance, institutions should:

- Explicitly recognize mental health as a valid reason for absence in attendance policies without requiring formal documentation.
- Pair flexibility with structured accountability measures that align with institutional and accreditation requirements, ensuring that students remain responsible for coursework while being supported.
- Train faculty on implementing trauma-informed attendance policies, ensuring that accountability measures do not become punitive barriers for students with mental health challenges.
- Conduct institutional policy analyses using Williams' (2022) framework to identify implicit definitions of flexibility and accountability, making these measures transparent to students.

Brown & Ramlackhan (2022) emphasize that accessibility must be embedded at the policy level rather than treated as an individual issue. Similarly, universal design principles advocate for proactive inclusion rather than reactive accommodation (Walters, 2010). Technical writers and policy designers can contribute by developing standardized policy language, creating faculty resources, and ensuring that institutional guidelines reflect a trauma-informed balance of flexibility and accountability.

By structuring attendance policies around these principles, institutions can move beyond reactive accommodations and toward a model where accessibility and academic rigor coexist within a supportive learning environment.

The Role of Institutions in Workforce Transition

While trauma-informed pedagogy fosters more equitable classrooms, universities must also prepare students for the realities of workplace policies. Social justice pedagogy often teaches students to critique oppressive structures (Hashlamon & Teston, 2022; Jones, 2016), but it does not always equip them with the tools to navigate and advocate within these systems. Trauma-informed pedagogy offers a more nuanced approach by first addressing students' own lived experiences before teaching them to advocate for others.

One of the most effective ways to bridge this gap is through real-world engagement with advocacy scenarios. Teaching students how and when to disclose a disability to obtain a workplace accommodation, for example, not only prepares them to advocate for their own needs but also deepens their understanding of advocacy as a broader skill. Students who are not personally impacted by trauma can benefit from this learning as well, as it helps them avoid the simplistic view that traumatized individuals simply need to "advocate for themselves." Through these exercises, all students can better grasp the complexities and potential risks of disclosure, the challenges of navigating accommodations, and the systemic barriers that often undermine those efforts. This broader understanding prevents students from overlooking the intricacies of advocacy and helps them develop more empathetic and effective strategies for supporting marginalized individuals in both workplace and societal contexts.

To further support the transition from school to the workforce, institutions and programs should:

- Provide training on workplace advocacy, helping students understand their rights and how to negotiate accommodations in professional settings.
- Create experiential learning opportunities that require students to engage with real-world advocacy challenges, such as developing accessibility audits or practicing disclosure conversations.
- Collaborate with employers to develop more flexible workplace policies that integrate trauma-informed principles.

- Incorporate user experience (UX) design principles (Crane & Cargile Cook, 2022) into curriculum design, ensuring students engage with real-world policy scenarios that balance efficiency with accessibility.

Simply teaching students about workplace rigidity without addressing systemic inequities risks reinforcing exclusionary practices (Hatcher & Gabriel, 2024). By equipping all students with the tools to understand and navigate both personal and institutional barriers, institutions can foster graduates who are not only prepared to advocate for themselves but are also better positioned to support and advocate for others. Accessibility must be more than an individual responsibility—it must be an institutional and societal commitment.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented a study examining how instructors develop, implement, and enforce attendance policies, albeit with a small sample of participants. Our research indicates that a variety of factors impact an instructor's approach to attendance policies, and from this exploratory analysis, we identified two major themes: flexibility and accountability. These themes reflect the tension many instructors experience when crafting policies that balance student inclusivity with institutional demands. However, these practices, while well-meaning, can still risk retraumatizing students, particularly those who have faced past dismissals or inadequate support. Ultimately, we argue that trauma-informed pedagogy provides a critical framework for instructors—not just in technical communication, but across higher education—to design and implement policies that ensure both student safety and growth. By applying the principles of trauma-informed pedagogy—safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment—academic institutions can begin to address the implicit structures that often undermine accessibility.

However, we acknowledge several limitations in this study. First, we did not collect demographic data on our instructor participants, which could have illuminated important cultural nuances in the ways different instructors approach attendance policies. Additionally, we did not gather student perspectives, which could have provided deeper insights into how students (especially those of various sociocultural backgrounds and bodily needs) perceive and experience the tension between flexibility and accountability. Further, additional principles of trauma-informed pedagogy such as mutuality and meaning may be applied in studies involving student participation. These gaps underscore the need for future research that incorporates both demographic data and student voices to further understand how different groups navigate and are impacted by attendance policies.

The opening student narrative has a hopeful ending. Despite the barriers to accessibility and retraumatization they faced throughout their academic journey,

they are about to graduate with their PhD. This narrative reflects the resilience of many students, but it also highlights a painful truth: students who experience retraumatization due to institutional policies and authority figures are far less likely to have the same outcome as the student in our narrative, often feeling forced to leave academia after repeated struggles with the system. This story underscores the importance of creating a more welcoming and accessible academic environment, where students are not required to disclose their trauma or vulnerability in just the right way, to just the right people, in order to gain the flexibility they need to succeed.

While this study focused on instructors in the English department, we argue that the principles of trauma-informed pedagogy should be expanded across all disciplines. Technical communicators, in particular, are uniquely positioned to conduct more policy analysis within institutional contexts, making the often implicit work of educators more explicit. By analyzing and addressing the policies that shape the classroom experience, educators and researchers alike can make meaningful contributions to dismantling barriers to access and inclusion in academia. We encourage technical communicators to take up this work, expanding the scope of research to include both the policy perspectives of instructors and the lived experiences of students.

It is time for academic institutions to reflect on their policies and practices and consider how they can be more inclusive from the outset. Rather than asking students to disclose their trauma to gain access to flexibility and support, we must build systems of care that do not rely on individual vulnerability. By fostering transparency, flexibility, and accountability in the classroom—and grounding these efforts in trauma-informed principles—we can create a more just and accessible academic environment for all students, helping them not just survive, but thrive, in their educational journeys.

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. What values or principles guide your process for developing and implementing an attendance policy?
2. What stakeholders do you consider when developing your attendance policies and how do you consider them?
3. Are there any mental or physical health concerns, both from your students and your own, that you consider when creating your attendance policy? If any, how do you address these health concerns, and with whom?
4. What influences your design of the attendance policies? Did you look for example syllabi? Did you talk to fellow instructors or seek feedback from your students?
5. How have you changed your attendance policies over time? What has caused you to revise your attendance policy in the past? How have you arrived at the current version?
6. How do you communicate the attendance policy to students?
7. How do you implement your attendance policy? Do you engage students in anyway or invite their contribution/feedback?
8. How do you enforce your attendance policy? What is your most common response when a student notifies you about missing a class?
9. Have your students struggled with your attendance policies and why? How do you respond to those struggles?
10. What changes would you like to make about your current attendance policy in the future, if any, and why?

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