



Trauma-Aware Teaching Checklist

This doc lives at: <https://bit.ly/traumachecklist>.

This checklist has been prepared for higher educators as a tool to reflect on their teaching and courses, regardless of modality. The [six principles of trauma-informed care](#) developed by SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) are a foundational concept in the trauma field. In this checklist, they are adapted to the field of education to assist teachers in creating more trauma-aware classrooms.

1. Safety

A sense of safety is a baseline for learning. If we are poised for an incoming threat (whether real or perceived), our systems are built to scan for and prepare for said threat. Higher order thinking will take a backseat to self-protection. Unsafe learning environments are a barrier to teaching and learning. All students will be harmed by unsafe learning environments, but they are particularly damaging for our learners with trauma histories. Trauma strips away our basic sense of safety and of being at home in our bodies. Creating safe and welcoming classroom environments benefits all students and teachers.

- Do your students feel safe in your classroom? Do you? Consistently and clearly communicate any safety concerns to your campus leaders and community. Remind them that a sense of safety is a precursor to learning.
- We can make assumptions about students' perceptions of safety. We can also ask them. Have you surveyed your students about how they feel in your class?
- Students should not be required or expected to disclose trauma to you in order to receive attention to their safety. Be mindful of how you talk to your students about safety, and let students know that disclosure is their choice. Respect students' privacy.
- Consider that the concept of safety varies for different populations (and within populations). What it takes for a White man in your class to feel safe might be very different than what a Black woman needs to feel safe. If you are from a non-minoritized population, continue to educate yourself and listen to the needs of marginalized communities.
- Work with your students during the first week of class to set community guidelines for the course.
- Pay careful attention to course discussions, whether online or in-person. Do you have a plan in place to keep students safe while encouraging creative and divergent thinking?
- Make clear to students how, when, and why they can contact you to report any concerning incidents in class (including those that arise from your own behaviors).

- ❑ Your ability to create trauma-aware courses rests heavily on the extent to which you manage your own well-being. Reflect upon the impact of trauma and toxic stress in your life. Trauma is treatable and [resources are available](#).
- ❑ Read: [Racial Battle Fatigue in Higher Education](#), Chapter 5: “Traumatic Pedagogy: When Epistemic Privilege and White Privilege Collide” by Tapo Chimbanga.

2. Trustworthiness and Transparency

Can students learn without trusting their teacher or each other? Possibly. But certainly, a trustworthy learning environment is much more efficient in support of the teaching and learning process, in addition to being trauma-aware. People who’ve experienced significant trauma are often hesitant to trust others. They might be particularly wary of trusting authority figures who they may feel have failed them in the past. Working to earn and keep our students’ trust will benefit all learners.

- ❑ In order to enter into a trusting collaboration with your students, you will need to reveal something of yourself as a fellow human being to them. Michelle Pacansky-Brock’s [model of Humanizing](#) is an excellent guide. What humanizing elements are included in your course? Can you add one or two to boost the trust factor?
- ❑ Trust rests on the truth. The truth is often uncomfortable, sometimes extraordinarily so. Tell it anyway. Tell it to yourself, your colleagues, your leaders, and your students. Make telling the truth a rigorous, serious, daily practice in your life.
- ❑ Telling the truth does not mean ignoring our students’ needs. For example, when providing feedback on assignments, we can be honest with students about their areas of opportunity without belittling or embarrassing them. Focus on strengths. Be kind and direct. Encourage your students. Quality feedback should leave students feeling hopeful and motivated, not discouraged.
- ❑ Being trustworthy and transparent includes healthy boundaries. Set clear, consistent, professional boundaries in your relationships. You can be human, real, and honest with your students while maintaining boundaries.
- ❑ Many of us never learned healthy boundaries in our home environments or elsewhere. If the concept of boundaries is new to you, seek out resources including readings, workshops, and therapy. Develop a working definition of what boundaries mean to you. For me, a boundary is a flexible but firm guideline that I set for myself to guide my choices, relationships, and behaviors. I cannot set boundaries for others because I cannot control anyone’s behaviors but my own.
- ❑ Be transparent in your decisions about course development, assignments, and grading. Let students “behind the curtain” and invite their feedback when possible. When in doubt, ask your students for their feedback.
- ❑ If you screw up (and you will, because you are a human being), name it, apologize, make it right, and move forward.
- ❑ Read: Brene Brown’s [“The Seven Elements of Trust.”](#)

3. Peer Support

You are an expert in your field with valuable information to share with your students. You are a leader in your course. And, it's also true that your students know things that you don't know, and they are also potential leaders in your course if you create space for them to step into that role. It is imperative that you create structures for your students to connect with their peers and to lead themselves and one another. This can happen both synchronous and asynchronously in any modality.

- ❑ Begin the course with ample time for students to connect with one another. This might happen in an introductory discussion or activity. Prioritize connections over reviewing the syllabus. Put first things first.
- ❑ In an online course, consider a tool like [FlipGrid](#) or [VoiceThread](#) to allow students to see and hear one another, if they so choose. But remember, [forcing students to be on camera](#) is not trauma-aware.
- ❑ For online students, synchronous sessions can be a powerful tool to build peer connections. [Use them mindfully](#), and create options for students to engage with you and one another.
- ❑ For BIPOC learners, LGBTQ students, and learners with disabilities, the opportunity for peer connections may be even more critical to their success. Does your course acknowledge the needs of these populations? Consider connecting these students to campus groups or resources outside of your class. Post that content in a course toolbox for easy access.
- ❑ Encourage (but don't require) students to find a course "buddy" with whom they'll exchange contact information. This is especially important for online students who can be prone to isolation.
- ❑ Whether or not you choose to tackle formal group assignments, have students working with their peers regularly.
- ❑ Read: [Sharing is Caring: 50 Collaborative Google Apps Activities](#).

4. Collaboration and Mutuality

The old model of higher education teaching was that of a sage on the stage. The professor might have even stood behind an actual podium, communicating a sense of distance and separation between them and their students. They were the only leader in the classroom, and students were often seen and treated as beneath the teacher. Most educators are now moving away from this rigidly hierarchical model toward a more collaborative, learning-centered approach.

- ❑ Reflect on your philosophy of education. To paraphrase Yeats, do you see teaching as the filling of a bucket or the lighting of a fire? Or perhaps, the creation of space for students' existing fires to burn more brightly?

- ❑ Review your course and note places where students have input on course content, discussions, and assignments. If there aren't any, add some. Where can you shift some authority from yourself to your students?
- ❑ Do we want to help students be able to work as part of high-functioning teams in their future? If so, we need to model and teach that in our classrooms. Consider how making students partners in your courses teaches them critical success skills for life, community, and their future careers.
- ❑ Ask students to set and share their learning goals at the start of the class. Revisit these periodically. Encourage students to edit their goals. Goals are meant to evolve.
- ❑ If issues arise over late work or other challenges, ask students, "What do you think should happen? What is your suggestion?" to involve them in the decision-making process.
- ❑ Teach students how, when, and why to advocate for themselves. Encourage help-seeking by answering students questions and then asking them, "Does this answer your question? If not, please let me know."
- ❑ Recognize that just as you are teaching your students, your students are also teaching you. Rethink teacher-student dichotomy.
- ❑ Read: Paulo Freire's [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#).

5. Empowerment (Voice) & Choice

One of my favorite teaching quotes comes from Thomas Carruthers: "A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary." We can help our students to find and use their voices, to speak truth to power, and to become more confident thinkers, writers, creators, and citizens. People who've experienced trauma were often in situations where their rights and choices were taken away from them. Trauma-aware classrooms empower students.

- ❑ Balance choice with structure. Choice is an important element to empower students to be more self-directed. Too much choice can cause students to become confused. Get to know your students and their unique needs.
- ❑ If you're new to infusing your course with choices for learners, start small. Overwhelming yourself will overwhelm your students. Pick one assignment or topic through which you can offer students a few choices.
- ❑ Some less-confident learners might get anxious about choices. They might ask you to tell them what to do. If they've never had choices in their learning before, they need to be taught how to make these choices. Consider meeting with those students 1:1 to help them process their options.
- ❑ Scaffold choices in the classroom by offering a "most popular" choice option. Again, for less confident learners, this lets them make a choice but provides them more structure.
- ❑ Consider choice in the context of [Gerald Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning Model \(SSDL\)](#). Recognize that learners will have different levels of confidence with choice. Aim

to meet students where they are and provide the appropriate level of direction/facilitation.

- ❑ Begin lessons by asking students to share what they already know about a topic. Create space for ALL students to share, either in a Zoom chat or in-person via think-pair-share type of activities. This will set the tone for the lesson by showing students that the foundation for learning is their own existing knowledge.
- ❑ Craft assignments in such a way that students are encouraged to utilize their own life experiences to learn and consider course content. Remember, students know things.
- ❑ Empowering students is not about forcing the issue. Remember, we want to give students choices. For example, requiring students to do a research project on the impact of COVID-19 on their community might be empowering for some and traumatizing for others, particularly for those in communities that are disproportionately harmed by this pandemic. Make sure there is a backup choice that would be less personal for students who so choose.
- ❑ Create spaces for all voices in the classroom. Do not ask minoritized students to speak on behalf of entire populations of minoritized people. Ijeoma Oluo's book, [So You Want to Talk About Race](#), includes excellent, practical guidelines on holding important conversations about race.
- ❑ It's okay to be nervous about releasing the illusion of control in the classroom. Learning and living are messy. You aren't alone in those feelings.
- ❑ Read: ["Does offering students a choice in assignments lead to greater engagement?"](#)

6. Cultural, Historical, & Gender Issues

If you wish to be trauma-aware, you must acknowledge anti-Blackness, all forms of racism, misogyny, ableism, and bigotry toward LGBTQ folx. To deny any form of oppression is an example of retraumatization. You are not asked to be perfect in your awareness; you are going to fail and fail often. You are asked to keep trying and to fail with greater awareness. You are asked to interrogate your own privilege and to act to dismantle that privilege. You are asked to think and feel deeply about how trauma impacts each of us differently. There is a tension here, because trauma does not care how much money or privilege we have. Anyone can experience trauma at any time. That said, money, privilege, and power also protect people from all manner of trauma. Both are true.

- ❑ Do your own work. Seek out existing resources on all types of oppressions and bigotry.
- ❑ Consider [incorporating discussions of race](#) into your classroom. Seek support for this work. Does your institution have a space for you to talk about your experiences with other educators?
- ❑ Cite Black women. <https://www.citeblackwomenscollective.org/> Include many diverse voices in your assigned readings and course content.

- ❑ Recognize that minoritized individuals have immense intelligence, wisdom, strength, and creativity as both individuals and communities. As Whitman said, we contain multitudes. That said, be extremely cautious of [conversations around grit](#), which can often discount systemic forces like racism and place blame on individuals. You will see this arise in the trauma literature under the topic of “resilience.” Resilience can sometimes be used to ask trauma survivors to practice a “chin up” mentality. This can lead to retraumatization. Remember, trauma is something that by definition is unbearable, and it is also true that we have personal and community resources that can help us bear it.
- ❑ Read Dena Simmons’s [“If we aren’t addressing racism, we aren’t addressing trauma.”](#)

Closing Thoughts on Creating a Simple and Sustainable Trauma-Aware Teaching Practice

This is a long list. Our time and energy are limited. We must develop practices that we can sustain. We cannot fill from an empty cup.

When I read, I underline a lot of important ideas. But some ideas jump off the page, and those will get some other type of annotation next to them, such as an * or a !. Read through this checklist, and notice what jumps off the page at you. What ideas grab you? Which feel most critical to you? Pick one or two. Start there, and start slowly. Becoming a trauma-aware educator is not something that can happen in a day, a week, a month, or probably even a year. It is a lifelong practice. Start where you are.

I read somewhere once that the point of making a mistake is to learn how to make more. I think of that often, recovering perfectionist that I am. We are all only human. Do your best with this challenging work, accept that you will make mistakes, and then through facing those mistakes with humility, you will have the chance for true alchemy: transforming your mistakes into lessons, growth, and service.

Take care of yourself. Take care of each other.