TRAVMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY FOR REVOLUTIONARY INQUIRY:
Using Reflection to Repair and Re-Engage Students

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INTRODUCTION

For public services librarians, instruction is a popular responsibility and librarians utilize instruction sessions as a primary means of supporting the development of information literacy skills in higher education. With this familiar responsibility comes the common challenge of engaging increasingly distracted and disengaged students, who may disregard or are unable to see the value of information literacy skills. Disengaged students in the library classroom are a perennial problem that often correspond to the same difficulties of one-shot instruction that librarians cite such as disconnection from the curriculum, shortened time frame, and a high number of pedagogical demands in one instructional session. With so much riding on this exchange, the one-shot interaction becomes rife with instructional mishaps, such as mismatch between the pedagogical outcomes and course materials and/or instructional activities that are passive, lecture, or demonstration focused. This results in student disengagement that is compounded by easy access to cell phones and social media. While students may not be disruptive, they are also not engaged or actively learning. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this disengagement from boredom or inattention to additional mental stresses or anxieties caused by larger events that seemingly have no easily recognizable resolutions. This piece applies trauma-informed praxis, alongside critical and revolutionary pedagogy in the library classroom, for the purposes of re-engaging with students. For the purposes of this paper, ‘library instructor’ is the term used for any person, whether a paraprofessional or degree-holding professional, who provides instruction on library-focused resources within the one-shot environment. The term ‘library classroom’ refers to the location where a library instructor performs instruction on library-focused resources or skills.

STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT

Disengaged students in the classroom are not new but disengagement today has more complex roots, due to recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, social, and cultural unrest. Since this student disengagement is a complex phenomenon connected to society and culture, it is more difficult to address in the library classroom. At first glance, the concept of student disengagement can be simply defined as a lack of engagement; however, recent research has revealed

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the complexities inherent in student disengagement. Chipchase et al. assert that disengagement is not a “steady state” of behavior that can manifest in different situations and at different times. Our hypothesis is that student disengagement has always been problematic within the one-shot scenario, however, recent events have resulted in personal and collective traumas that have further amplified student disconnection. Given the changing and complex global circumstances and seen through the lens of complex trauma, today’s disengaged students require a different type of intervention. Zingarelli-Sweet notes several behaviors in *Keeping Up With Trauma-Informed Pedagogy* that reflect disengagement resulting from traumatic stress such as difficulty focusing and thinking deeply, issues with retaining and recalling information, and difficulty with taking risks such as responding to questions. Because these student behaviors have been observed in the library classroom before the pandemic, it becomes more contingent on instructors to consider trauma-informed pedagogy in addressing the underlying and often hidden causes of disengagement.

Cultural shifts resulting from the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020 have fundamentally reshaped the intellectual landscape and has surfaced inequities in all aspects of American society. Anecdotally, many instructors have recounted experiences with disconnected and disillusioned students especially within the last few years. Multiple newspapers and journals have recently published articles and opinion pieces on student disengagement in colleges and universities across the country that support these claims. In most pieces, teachers at all levels recount similar experiences with disconnected and disillusioned students. In this critical moment, we need to grapple with our instructional practices and assumptions all of which reinforce institutional norms of othering, particularly from a privileged status.

This paper focuses on exploring three distinct pedagogies: trauma-informed pedagogy, revolutionary or critical pedagogy, and reflective practices. Within the short span of this paper, it is impossible to address all the various aspects of these practices. To enable engagement and application, this paper presents highlights from these pedagogies along with teaching practices and examples to ground the discussion. While the practices may not be revolutionary by nature, the context and the intent that ground these teaching practices will differ from a more traditional practice of library instruction. However, it is necessary to first identify and define trauma-informed pedagogy.

**TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, AND INFORMATION LITERACY**

Sandy Grande in her work *Red Pedagogy* uses concepts from Revolutionary Pedagogy to ground her work and through her examples, instructors can use the same grounding principles in the library classroom. Grande relates three foundational characteristics of revolutionary pedagogy that are particularly salient to library instruction. Revolutionary pedagogy is a collective process, based on the principles of Paulo Freire’s work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire is critical of the systems in place, and he uncovers manifestations of capitalist social relations in the classroom. Revolutionary pedagogy is also a participatory process that must equally involve teachers and learners while fostering creativity and intellectual curiosity. Lensing library instruction through these grounding ideas helps instructors reveal areas of attitudinal changes that enable trauma-informed (TI) practices.

Grande’s first statement is that revolutionary pedagogy is a collective process which translates to library instructors who question their role as ‘sages on stage’ or gatekeepers of knowledge. In the same way Freire analyzes the hierarchical pitfalls of transactional education, library instructors can identify areas in lesson plans and classroom activities that are contrary to collective or participatory implementation. By critically assessing these teaching practices, library instructors can uncover systemic injustices, identify conversations regarding the structure of knowledge systems, and engage learners in deeper understanding of colonialist or capitalist assumptions that often privilege certain knowledge systems over others. Combined with TI pedagogy, revolutionary pedagogy amplifies grounding ideas such as the need for self-reflection and democratization of teaching and learning; and the importance of empowering learners through empathy and positive regard. TI pedagogy begins by acknowledging the personal and collective trauma students may have experienced or are experiencing while enacting teaching strategies that support and nurture students in their learning journeys. Much like revolution-
ary pedagogy, TI pedagogy also emphasizes the participatory process of learning through empathy. Additionally, TI pedagogic practices are centered on the learner’s experience or funds of knowledge, rather than the transmission of content. Zingarelli-Sweet offer several TI teaching strategies, including focusing on learning and student safety as primary goals in instruction, and the importance of collaboration and power-sharing, which, again, involves participatory designs, collective processes, and creative outputs.

**REFLECTIVE PRAXIS AND INFORMATION LITERACY**

Sharon Ravitch has created a framework for reflective pedagogy, termed Flux pedagogy, designed in response to the pandemic. Flux pedagogy also offers several pedagogical practices relating to student disengagement in the classroom. Ravitch’s work serves as an example of emergent pedagogy that fuses teaching ideologies and practices in response to current instructional challenges. Perhaps of most importance is the use of the ‘third space’, which is a reflexive ‘step-back’ that educators and students can take in the classroom. This reflexive practice also enables cooperative creativity and collaboration between instructors and learners. By de-emphasizing the separateness between the roles of instructors and learners, Ravitch’s Flux pedagogy acts as a step in the evolution of teaching that can inform instructional practices.

In the creation of Flux pedagogy, Ravitch names the *Inquiry Stance Pedagogy*, which was established by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle in the late 1990s.\(^4\) Cochran-Smith and Lytle center inquiry as a habit of mind and a way of knowing that disrupts the concepts of a knowledge base for teaching; and instead expands educational practices to include professionals and practitioners as educators. *Inquiry Stance Pedagogy* also rejects the binary of formal knowledge and practical knowledge in the same way that Grande problematizes the separation of formal knowledge and personal knowledge.\(^5\) It is a small jump to see the connections between *Inquiry Stance Pedagogy* and the *Research as Inquiry* frame of the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.\(^6\) Both the *Research as Inquiry* frame and *Inquiry Stance Pedagogy* establish the importance of problems and questions as a means of extending knowledge through debate and dialogue work. Both maintain that it is through the practice of focusing on areas of disagreement or unresolved issues that knowledge is extended.

Criticality in Flux pedagogy extends to the instructor, and Ravitch’s melding of both *Inquiry Stance Pedagogy* and TI pedagogy pushes the bounds of inquiry into self-inquiry for the ultimate purpose of examining the systems and foundations of belief systems.\(^7\) When extended to information literacy and the library classroom, inquiry and self-reflection can take the form of reevaluating learning activities, and the positionality of the library instructor concerning learners. Specifically, learning activities in library classrooms must be reviewed from the stance of ‘problematicizing’ the separateness of the instructor and learners and instead focus on areas of participatory design from the perspectives of trauma-informed pedagogy and reflection to de-emphasize encoded power structures. As aforementioned, Grande, Brandt, Freire, and others emphasize the importance of criticality to identify and disrupt the transactional and hierarchical form of education that envisions educators as holders of knowledge and learners as empty receptacles that need to be filled.

**WHAT COULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN OUR CLASSROOMS?**

Disrupting teaching spaces to avoid focusing on instructors encourages small-group learning and discussion, particularly after library instructors engage in active listening and inquiry as a means of power sharing. This practice can further engage learners and disrupt othering that often happens unintentionally in learning environments. The assumption that the library instructor possesses knowledge unknown to the library patron replicates the system of knowledge oppression that continues to censor or degenerate other forms of knowledge production. Again, following Grande’s work, library instructors can highlight the assumptions of colonialist knowledge systems by questioning the assumed value of formal knowledge over personal or local knowledge, and by questioning the inherent value ascribed to progress.\(^8\) Privileged assumptions and colonialist knowledge practices also enforce barriers to learning that isolate learners with burgeoning skills, resulting in triggering trauma responses from disengaged students who cannot meaningfully connect their classroom experiences with their real-life experiences. Questioning our current knowledge systems also reveals how librarians privi-
lege scholarly knowledge and discriminate against other forms of knowledge creation. Finally, lecture-based instruction enforces the power dynamic of information haves over information have-nots and replicates capitalist structures of exploitation.

In the library classroom, encoded power dynamics are present in didactic forms of presentation that exclude learner interaction. Therefore, library instructors must grapple with instructional practices and assumptions that reinforce institutional norms of othering, particularly from a privileged standpoint. The ‘sage on stage’ method of library instruction is not impactful enough to re-engage our struggling students. According to TI pedagogy and Flux pedagogy, learners are overwhelmed and disengaged. Demonstration and lecture are also forms of ‘othering’ that reinforce the transactional and hierarchical nature of instruction, further alienating students who are already struggling to engage. Participatory design and acknowledging learners’ lived experiences and past learning disrupts the one-way flow of information and centers the process of learning as a collaborative and creative endeavor.

Theoretical grounding in TI and Flux pedagogy may result in familiar classroom practices that have a different impact, if instructors are intentional about re-imagining the context of common library classroom activities. Nelsen et al. discuss in detail grounding principles that can change the experience of library classroom activities. For this paper, three areas of TI pedagogy will be discussed: safety (physical, psychological, and emotional), transparency, and peer support.

The concept of safety is fundamental to TI pedagogy. Library instructors must be intentional with creating a sense of psychological, emotional, and physical safety by first using self-reflective practices to define their positionality and acknowledging their personal traumas. Through self-reflection, library instructors can acknowledge how their own positionality and trauma may affect their own instruction, and the learning environments they create. This practice is not to designed to provoke a sense of shame or blame in library instructors, but rather it empowers them to determine and design unique learning environments that are more accessible or safe to some learners. Awareness as to whom one’s library classroom is most accessible to empowers instructors to make accommodations for learners who may need more support in their learning environments. One such example is group learning activity used by one of the authors that is meant to provide psychological and emotional safety by giving students time and space to learn in a low-stake environment, but requires students to present in a physical space that is not accessible. Understanding that feelings of safety can have different dimensions and aspects, an instructor can then be flexible in adapting to learners with different needs. In the above example, the instructor, understanding the pitfalls of the exercise, can provide accommodations or modifications to allow all students to engage by changing the presentation requirements, or creating alternatives before the instructional session.

Inherent in safe environments is the opportunity for learners and teachers to fail in the classroom without retraumatization. Focusing on how to incorporate failure into lesson plans and learning activities, while modeling attitudinal positions towards failure can lessen or eliminate further retraumatization that results in further disengagement. Ravitch discusses radical self-care and compassion as a means for empowering learners, noting that the best learning happens when it is responsive, contextualized, and active. Incorporating failure, emphasizing process over product, and modeling resiliency in the library classroom decreases the potential for re-traumatization. Flux pedagogy also relates the importance of re-storying and re-telling trauma as a means of processing. While learners may not have the full practice of re-storying in a one-shot environment, repeated engagement with safe learning spaces where failure is incorporated into the learning process, can help increase engagement with learners. An example of safety could be modeling intentional failed searches, or modeling resilience through adjustments to search strategies.

Physical, psychological, and emotional safety in the classroom can be established through practices such as the instructor deliberately asking for consent before intervening in class activities or independent learning exercises. In this example, it may seem obvious that allowing students to learn for themselves is necessary in order for learning to be salient. However, through self-reflection, library instructors become ‘holders’ of knowledge, and they ask for consent as a way to acknowledge the personal agency of learners in an attempt to share power. As noted by Nelsen, TI practices are often simply good teaching practices. The difference between the same exercise with and without TI comes down to the sustainability and evolution of teaching practices. Without the intention of TI, Flux, or other reflective practices as the underpinning of teaching practice, such exercises may
drop off in favor of new practices, while as intentional TI practices that will maintain and model a safe learning environment in sync with the continued evolution of learners over time.

Transparency is another practice that can be most impactful in self-reflective practices. Library instructors can intentionally practice transparency by utilizing soft skills, such as empathy, cultural competencies, and emotional intelligence. Tolley discusses four practices to develop empathy: perspective-taking, recognizing emotions, refraining from judgment, and open communication. Each of these practices are more impactful in one’s development of empathy through self-reflection. Again, self-reflection is the piece that informs library instructors about the unique attributes of the learning environment they create, and empowers them to make accommodations or changes as necessary. Transparency in the library classroom can take the form of providing learners with the 'why' behind classroom activities, or sharing learning objectives. Transparency can also take the form of the explicit practice of cultural competencies, including highlighting cultural assumptions of knowledge systems, such as the shortcomings of the peer review cycle. With the intentionality of creating a transparent learning environment, good teaching practices can then be used in the service of a TI classroom.

Disrupting the power hierarchy in the library classroom can be achieved through the use of peer support or peer-to-peer learning activities. In the learner-focused classroom, the library instructor can decentralize learning and teaching through peer activities, group learning, and peer-to-peer teaching. While many library instructors incorporate group learning or peer teaching into the classroom, being deliberately transparent and highlighting the importance of peer teaching and learning refocuses from instructor-provided objectives to learner-focused skills practice. Peer learning can help espouse a sense of agency in learners, which can in turn mitigate feelings of disengagement. Involving students in their own learning has an additional benefit of peer learning and teaching, since discipline instructors (instructors outside of the library) often utilize similar teaching techniques, particularly in an active learning classroom.

CONCLUSION

There is not enough space to address thoroughly aspects of these pedagogies, and how they can be applied the library classroom. Additionally, the application of these ideas, particularly when focused on instructor attitudinal changes, is difficult, if not impossible to assess. However, even with these challenges, continued evolution in response to the changing social, cultural, and global context of our learners is necessary. While this paper is a first exploratory step in the process, the ideas discussed can provide guideposts for library instructors by highlighting areas of library instruction that warrant deeper critique and revision, particularly in regard to instructor attitudes and classroom learning activities.

NOTES


11. "On its face, teaching using a trauma-informed approach is just good teaching." (Nelsen et al., 2022, p. 181)


BIBLIOGRAPHY


