



Trauma-Informed Teaching: How to Be More Intentional with Course Policies, LMS, and Scaffolding Feedback

July 21, 2021 [Jamie Butler, MALS](https://www.facultyfocus.com/author/ff-jamiebutler/)



In higher education, administrators and educators are constantly rethinking how to further help students best retain course information. Recently, many have focused their attention to brain-based learning since there’s a plethora of new information on how the brain works—which helps us identify what areas of the brain initiates and promotes learning. We have discovered that our brains can be rewired if we choose to put an effort in that direction; [neuroplasticity](https://www.medicinenet.com/neuroplasticity/definition.htm) (<https://www.medicinenet.com/neuroplasticity/definition.htm>) is defined as the brain’s ability to adapt based on situations. This means that the traumatic brain can be reorganized. This is done by creating new neural pathways that strengthen new synapses connections and weaken other synapses connections. Science has proven that the traumatic brain develops differently. For example, if a student has experienced multiple traumas, the flight or fight mechanism of the brain (the amygdala) has not developed in an optimal environment to be able to appropriately distinguish between real danger and something that is just an everyday occurrence. Since our brain’s development is dependent on the environment to present conclusions that help us perceive the world around us, it is vital to reconsider the platforms and strategies being used so we can efficiently interact with the traumatized brain. Revising course policies, using LMS tools to increase student involvement, and providing scaffolding feedback are all strategies that can be used to show consideration of students that have suffered trauma, also known as trauma-informed pedagogy.

Revising course policies

Instructors’ course policies sometimes reflect that they favor students who are aware of what to expect from trekking a college path and who respect the idiosyncrasies of the course—this enforces a fixed mindset. Revising our course policies can help with developing a trauma-informed curriculum because the language and considerations can foster a growth mindset. Students who have experienced trauma may perceive words differently than students who have developed without trauma. For example, in brain-based learning we take advantage of the development of the prefrontal cortex. According to [thescienceofpsychotherapy.com](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com) (<https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/orbitofrontal-prefrontal-cortex-ofc/>) (2017), “The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is the cerebral cortex covering the front part of the frontal lobe. This brain region has been implicated in planning complex cognitive behavior, personality expression, decision making, and moderating social behavior. The basic activity of this brain region is considered to be orchestration of thoughts and actions in accordance with internal goals.” This part of the brain also houses the amygdala, which processes our emotion and regulates the fight or flight system (Chang, Barack, and Platt 2012). As a reminder, note that the [American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org/topics/disasters-response/recovering) (<https://www.apa.org/topics/disasters-response/recovering>) defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event...Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.” With this background information we can consider revising our course policies to help learners separate the learning process from the trauma by giving them a new experience that can validate that they have the right to learn and grow.



Revising course policies also considers that students need space to learn how to manage their time, which includes incorporating (https://www.fac obtaining a degree into their life plans. The amygdala not developing properly means that a student may perceive strict course policies as a reason to take flight because it confirms their negative perspective of their intelligence. Course policies that reflect standards and an understanding of the learning process help make new neural pathways—these new course policies will confirm that a student can learn to acclimate to higher education which puts faith in the learning process. Incorporating course policies that reflect encouragement and a willingness to partner with your learners can mitigate students responding to course policies with a trauma response.

Utilizing your LMS

Using your LMS is another strategy for helping students who have experienced trauma. LMS systems have many resources that allow us to track logistics, from assignment grades to retrieving course data and statistics. When modules are developed in your LMS, instructors are able to view when a student has read assigned readings and how much time they have spent on those modules. You can then use this information to regulate when to allow make-up quizzes and other assignments, which helps break student brain synapses that believe not giving full effort will lessen the disappointment in a grade. When students need to make-up an assignment, you can review how much time has been spent studying the modules and if the student has taken the opportunity to do the practice quizzes. Instructors can allow a make-up or redo only if the student chooses to go back and study the content. This helps student brain synapses believe that if they put in the effort, then can reach their goals. Since LMS is required for students to navigate their class, in most cases, helping them perceive it in a helpful way will only increase engagement in the content that is being learned.

Scaffolding feedback guidance

Developing scaffolding feedback that provides guidance on how to elevate in proficiency is another useful strategy. Feedback in general has been discussed for eons in every facet of the world, especially within leadership communities. In higher education, feedback is the golden egg of improvement. We count on students to assess where they are in their learning based on detailed comments and feedback, and hope they apply it to advance their overall competency. Scaffolding feedback also helps take advantage of the retrieval phase in brain-based learning. Creating assignments and strategies that reiterate the lesson or content help with the memorization phase of the learning process. By considering the type of direction that we guide our students towards, we can help eradicate trauma-informed responses (fight or flight) from students. According to the Embody Lab's *Embodying Your Curriculum* webinar, presented by Dr. Anita Chari and Angelica Singh, "Symptoms of undischarged traumatic stress spikes instead of flows. This causes a black and white perception – which is a form of protection." When providing scaffolding feedback for students, highlight what the student should continue to do and why it is helpful to their work. Additionally, provide guidance on the direction they should take in order to effectively achieve the goal of the assignment. This helps alleviate any tension students may have about the assignment. Scaffolding feedback also uses neutral language to assist in detaching emotions from a traumatic experience. As Dr. Anita Chari eloquently stated in the above-mentioned webinar, "Trauma is about being seen and heard. When we use neutral language, we are being seen and heard." If the brain gets the recognition it needs through scaffolding feedback, which acknowledges the effort and skills that are useful in a student's assignment, we are helping weaken old synapses connections and helping strengthen new synapses connections.

Enhancing your efforts to learn

Every new generation that chooses to obtain a degree provides higher education administrators and instructors an opportunity to continue to explore the intricacies in how we best learn. Educators pride themselves on being lifelong learners, which is indicative that there will always be something new to learn that will enhance our efforts in how to help students meet the course objectives. Incorporating revised course policies, showing that the LMS is helpful for the student, and providing encouragement in the form of scaffolding feedback are a few basic strategies to build from that can help students restructure a traumatic brain.

Professor Jamie Butler, MALS, is an instructor of freshman English composition with Atlanta Metropolitan State College in the school of social sciences and humanities. Professor Butler has led faculty learning communities that address brain-based learning and is interested in continuing to learn how to apply brain-based learning to revised curriculum.

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