

Special Issue: Critical Perspectives on Online Trauma

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

The role of technology in higher education has rapidly evolved, even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice reckoning of 2020. Since these events, the call for increased access to digital learning has markedly increased. We propose that the conversation must shift from debating the benefits of technology to how higher education will utilize technology to empower those who are part of its culture. While technology is an inevitable part of the future of higher education, online trauma is not and should not be accepted as such. Common examples of online trauma may include cyberbullying and online harassment, being excessively exposed to hateful and harmful content, or viewing violent media of police brutality.

The research and practical perspectives within this issue challenge the thinking that online spaces are simply environments in which students, faculty, and staff are consumers and not creators. The authors present data and ideas which can help administrators intentionally consider online spaces as opportunities for students and faculty of marginalized identity groups to co-create conditions in which their voices are amplified and they are allowed to thrive in ways that in-person environments have not historically offered.

We recommend that faculty and administrators within higher education use this special issue as a launching point to further consider how to use online spaces to first, heal the trauma already caused by systemic oppression and second, to continue closing the gap of knowledge about how online spaces can both cause and heal trauma. This should involve collaboration across disciplines and traditionally siloed relationships, and it must involve students who will have a more in-depth understanding of technology and its true potential.

CONTRIBUTIONS

We approach this special issue as both practitioners and researchers seeking to advance the conversation about how technology is shaping the college experience. While considerable work has been done on the efficacy and impact of technology in the lives of higher education faculty, staff, and students, the research on the role of technology in how our colleagues and students experience and heal from trauma is still nascent. We proposed this special issue to begin to address this gap. We hope that the articles in this issue advance the conversation about the affordances and concerns of technology in addressing trauma.

Recognizing the unavoidable digital connectivity of our modern lives, we wish to move the conversation beyond if technology is helpful vs. harmful or good vs. bad, to instead accept that - like face-to-face relationships - they can be both. This issue addresses the intersection of online communities and trauma as both a space that invites or perpetuates trauma and violence (i.e., online trauma), as well as a site for resistance, counter-storytelling, and healing. By accepting both the permanence of online connectivity in our lives and the complicated possibilities these digital connections afford, we can more thoughtfully explore how to navigate technology to prevent and respond to trauma.

Of particular importance in assembling this special issue was to invite and encourage works that take a critical or intersectional approach. The existing literature on online trauma, as well as how online spaces can support healing, have predominantly centered white faculty, staff, and students. The higher education literature also fails to account for how our online experiences are shaped by our social identities (i.e., how our online selves are racialized and gendered). The first three articles in this issue highlight such intersections. First, Hollingworth and Byrne's empirical article, "'Minding My Business': Understanding Black HBCU Undergraduate Women's Responses to Online Harassment Scenarios" adopts a racial trauma framework to study how Black women's prior experiences with online trauma and university authorities shape how they respond to instances of online harassment and cyberstalking. The second article of this issue, entitled "@BlackAtAuburn: A Preliminary Content Analysis of Social Media Counterspace," Russel explores how Black undergraduate students leveraged Instagram as a counterspace to tell their stories of face-to-face trauma to push back on the university's narrative as a culturally supportive campus environment. The third article in this issue, a practitioner perspective from Grimes titled "Cyberviolence Prevention & Response," invites the reader to consider how our social and educational online spaces perpetuate cyberviolence and how, as educators, we can utilize our existing tools to prevent and respond to cyberviolence. We hope that together these works advance our thinking about the online environment as both a space for experiencing and healing from racialized trauma.

The final two articles in this issue, both practitioner and theoretical perspectives invite higher education faculty and administrators to consider how their online teaching practices and pedagogies might result in trauma for both instructors and students, as well as how online environments can be designed to be healing spaces for students navigating trauma. In "Cyborg Identity, Trauma and Online Learning,"

Douglass critiques the idealist vision of online learning and poses that, by adopting a cyborg approach, faculty can take steps in their teaching and student support to prevent the replication of trauma. Finally, in the article, “Using the Andragogical Process as a Framework for Applying Trauma-Informed Practices in the Online Environment,” Bond Chan highlights the relationship between adult learning theory and trauma-informed teaching practices to pose clear takeaways for online instructors on how to create more supportive and healing online learning experiences for adult students.

We are grateful for the authors and editors who contributed to the production of this special issue, and we look forward to the conversations and lines of inquiry that stem from these thoughtful works.

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