Practitioner & Theoretical Perspectives

OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

© *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education*
Volume 1, Issue 2 (2022), pp. 59-71
ISSN: 2832-1723 (Print), 2832-1731 (Online)
Doi: 10.32674/jtse.v1i2.4831
ojed.org/jtse

Using Andragogy for Trauma-Informed Practice in Online Environments

Alina Bond Chan
Baylor University

ABSTRACT

A trauma-informed educational approach recognizes the impact of trauma on learning and responds with educational practices that reduce the risk of retraumatization while promoting resiliency and growth. Many postsecondary educators have advocated for such an approach following the COVID-19 pandemic which increased exposure to trauma, inequitably impacting racial and ethnic minority groups. While best practices have been shared by educators, they frequently do not include a theory of learning that guides this educational approach. Herein I analyze the basic assumptions of andragogy and the trauma-informed approach, draw connections between their mutual focus on developing collaborative learning environments, and propose that the andragogical process may serve as a framework for applying trauma-informed online teaching practices. Finally, I provide practical examples of applying such teaching practices in the online environment to support trauma-affected marginalized populations.

Keywords: andragogy, trauma-informed approach, online teaching, adult learners, postsecondary education

Research from public health experts shows that trauma impacts all aspects of life including physical, social, emotional, and mental well-being (Anda et al., 2006; Felitti et al., 1998/2019; Khrapatina & Berman, 2017; Van der Kolk, 2015). Trauma can be understood as single, complex, or multiple events that are "experienced by the individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening" and may be due to the individual being part of a marginalized or oppressed group (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014, p. 7). In the educational context, trauma may impact the learning process, including the learner's

ability to maintain attention and retain information, as well as educational outcomes such as persistence, and completion of postsecondary education (Davidson, n.d.; Dombo & Sabatino, 2019; Doughty, 2020).

The impact of trauma on learning led educators to advocate for trauma-informed approaches throughout the higher education setting (Carello & Butler, 2015; Davidson, n.d.; Doughty, 2020; Imad, 2020). Such approaches acknowledge the impact of trauma and respond with practices that promote growth and resiliency while reducing the risk of retraumatization (Carello, 2018; Carello & Butler, 2015; Hitchcock et al., 2021; Sherwood et al., 2021). The need for a trauma-informed approach to higher education was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic when the learning environment was significantly impacted; in particular, racial and ethnic minority groups experienced increased exposure to trauma and higher rates of illness and death (Killerby et al., 2020; Marquart et al., 2020; Stokes et al., 2020). As a result, many educators implemented trauma-informed practices in the online environment by providing choice and flexibility in how students accessed material and through developing opportunities for support and connection (Hitchcock et al., 2021; Imad, 2020; Sherwood et al., 2021). However, few educators have explored the learning theories that may support these trauma-informed practices. It is important to identify such a theory to guide educators in understanding the procedures and circumstances in which learning occurs best (Saunders & Wong, 2020). One such theory is the classic theory of andragogy, or adult learning, which proposes that adults learn best when they are centered in the learning process and educators view them as co-creators of knowledge within the online class environment (Knowles et al., 1998; 2020).

Herein I propose that the theory of andragogy overlaps with many key assumptions of a trauma-informed approach and therefore may serve as a supportive framework for applying trauma-informed practices in the online environment. In this article, I will define trauma-informed teaching principles and the andragogical process, describe the intersection of andragogy and a trauma-informed approach, and use the andragogical process as a framework to apply trauma-informed online practices.

TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

The initial literature by SAMHSA outlines six principles of trauma-informed care in practice and organizational settings (SAMHSA, 2014). These principles have been adapted for use in the higher education setting; some educators have added a seventh (Carello, 2020; Hitchcock et al., 2021; Marquart et al., 2020; Sherwood et al., 2021). As there are variations in identifying and defining these principles within higher education, I will use the following definitions of trauma-informed teaching principles throughout this article:

- Safety and Respect- reducing traumatic stress in the online environment by promoting a sense of safety, respect, and civility throughout class interactions (Carello, 2018; Hitchcock et al., 2021; SAMHSA, 2014).

- Trustworthiness and Transparency- promoting interactions that have the goal of "building and maintaining trust" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 11); providing clear, consistent information and appropriate boundaries (Carello, 2018).

- Support and Connection- promoting an environment of support among students and a sense of belonging in the learning process (Carello, 2018; Freeman et al., 2007).

- Collaboration and Mutuality- sharing power and decision-making with students (SAMHSA, 2014), as well as understanding and addressing the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression in the online setting (Sherwood et al., 2021).

- Empowerment, Voice, and Choice- acknowledging and building on students' strengths and providing students with choices around how they engage in the online course material (SAMHSA, 2014; Sherwood et al., 2021).

- Social Justice / Historical, Cultural, and Gender Awareness- "recognizing and addressing historical trauma," "actively moving past cultural stereotypes and biases" and "leverag[ing] the healing value of traditional cultural connections" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 11).

- Resilience, Growth, and Change- class members "recogniz[ing] each other's strengths and resilience, and … provid[ing] feedback to help each other grow and change" (Carello, 2020, p. 1).

Many online educators adopted these principles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and shared experiences and best practices. These included approaching students with a perspective of cultural humility, encouraging self-care practices, communicating clearly, granting individual agency in accessing and completing learning activities, and encouraging collaboration and mutual support (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Carello, 2020; Hitchcock et al., 2021; Imad, 2022; Sherwood et al., 2021). As the application of such trauma-informed practices grows, it is important to examine how a theory of learning may support this application to better understand and conceptualize practical approaches. Next, I will describe and compare the basic assumptions of andragogy with those of a trauma-informed approach to determine how the andragogical process may be used as a framework for applying trauma-informed principles.

THE THEORY OF ANDRAGOGY

The classic theory of andragogy, defined by adult educator Malcolm Knowles as "a set of assumptions about how adults learn," can be traced back to the teaching methods of such historical figures such as Confucius, Jesus, Socrates, and Plato (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 72). Knowles identified these great teachers as holding a

common belief that learning was a "process of mental inquiry, not passive reception of transmitted content" (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 35). Thus, these individuals developed methods that treated the adult learner as an equal partner in co-constructing knowledge and built off the learners' lived experiences within their cultural context (Knowles et al., 1998).

The andragogical theory of learning is based on six core assumptions about adult learners and how they learn (Knowles et al., 1998; 2020). These assumptions assert that adult learners: (a) need to understand why they are learning, (b) are self-directed, (c) bring significant experiences that must be acknowledged, (d) are influenced to learn by real-life situations, (e) are problem or task-focused, and (f) are internally motivated (Knowles et al., 1998; 2020). They are influenced both by individual and situational differences and the goals and purpose of learning (Knowles et al., 1998; 2020). The theory of andragogy centers the student and focuses on the co-construction of knowledge throughout the learning experience.

Within andragogical theory, the learning experience is developed through a process in which the educator collaborates with the learner on a set of procedures, which consists of the following steps: (a) preparing the learner for the program; (b) setting the climate for learning; (c) involving learners in the process of planning, diagnosing needs, and setting goals; and (d) designing learning plans, activities, and evaluation of learning (Knowles et al., 2020). Based on these descriptions, I will now draw connections between the theory of andragogy and a trauma-informed approach by demonstrating the similarities in their core beliefs.

INTERSECTING ANDRAGOGY AND TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

The theory of andragogy and a trauma-informed approach to education are based on similar beliefs about the learning process and the role of educators and learners. These include developing positive and supportive learning environments, viewing the educator as a facilitator of the learning process, and partnering with learners to co-create knowledge in the learning environment. Each of these areas exemplifies an intersection between the theory of andragogy and a trauma-informed approach.

First, both the theory of andragogy and a trauma-informed approach emphasize the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that is both safe and respectful. The theory of andragogy proposes that the learning climate should provide both physical and psychological safety and comfort, and the adult learner should be "accepted, respected, and supported" throughout the learning process (Knowles, 1980, p. 47). The trauma-informed approach similarly has the principle of "safety and respect," which includes the andragogical practices of being genuine, showing unconditional positive regard, and expressing accurate empathy (Rogers, 1951, cited in Knowles et al., 1998).

Second, the role of the educator as a facilitator of the learning process is supported by both the theory of andragogy and a trauma-informed perspective. Andragogical theory asserts that the educator's role is to co-create knowledge with the student by not only respecting their prior knowledge and experiences, but also empowering them to contribute to course development (Knowles et al., 2020; Blondy, 2007). This aligns with the trauma-informed principles of collaboration and

mutuality, along with empowerment, voice, and choice. Educators applying a trauma-informed approach collaborate with students on developing goals, activities, and assignments while empowering them by acknowledging their experiences and incorporating their perspectives and input into the course design (Carello, 2020).

Finally, both the theory of andragogy and a trauma-informed approach place the learners at the center, where they are viewed as equal partners to educators in the process of learning. The theory of andragogy upholds a belief that all individuals are motivated to learn, grow, and self-actualize (Knowles et al., 1998). As a result, learners are respected and supported throughout the process of learning. This perspective is supported through a trauma-informed approach that builds off learners' strengths and encourages resiliency and growth. Both the theory of andragogy and a trauma-informed approach promote the growth and flourishing of the learner through an environment of respect, support, collaboration, and empowerment (Carello, 2020). Based on these similarities, I propose that the andragogical process may provide a framework for applying trauma-informed practices in the online environment.

APPLYING ANDRAGOGY IN TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

Historically, online learning has expanded students' access to higher education and met their need for a flexible approach to learning. However, some students, particularly from marginalized groups, may feel disconnected and experience poor educational outcomes (Robinson et al., 2017; Shea & Bijderano, 2019; Sun & Chen, 2016;). Online educators have advocated for supporting student success by intentionally focusing on creating online environments in which students feel a sense of support, connection, care, and instructor presence (Robinson et al., 2020). The pandemic highlighted this need; educators responded by incorporating trauma-informed practices in the online environment. I propose that these practices may be applied through the framework of the andragogical process to support trauma-affected marginalized students' success in the online environment.

Educators can support trauma-informed practices in the online environment by linking andragogical principles to action items that can be implemented at different points in the virtual learning space. In Figure 1, I illustrate the intersection between the andragogical process and its principles and the seven principles of trauma-informed approaches. While I assert that specific trauma-informed principles may be best applied during certain parts of the andragogical process, it is also important to use the trauma-informed approach as a lens throughout the entire process to understand the effects of trauma, plan to prevent trauma, and promote resiliency and growth. Next, I will discuss each element of the andragogical process, applicable trauma-informed principles, and examples of relevant trauma-informed online practices.

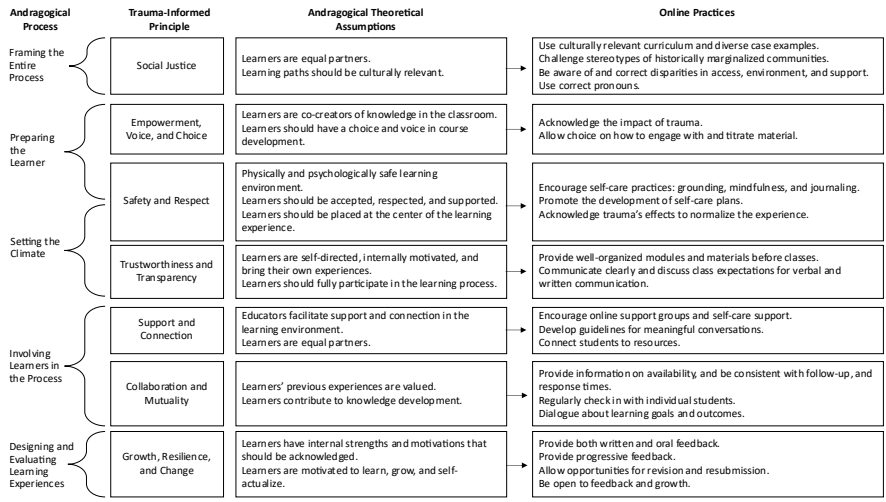

Figure 1. Andragogical Process & Trauma-Informed Principles & Practice

Preparing the Online Learner

The first part of the andragogical process focuses on preparing students to participate in the learning experience. In this step, applying the trauma-informed principle of safety and respect can be useful as it places the learner at the center of the experience and reduces threats in the learning environment. This allows the learner to move from focusing on survival into a mindset that will allow the facilitation of learning (Imad, 2020). Educators may apply this principle by encouraging self-care practices and integrating self-care plan development into the classroom routine (Agllias, 2012; Black, 2008; Butler et al., 2017). Self-care practices could include mindfulness, grounding, resourcing, journaling, or other practices that students identify as caring for their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Shannon et al., 2014). For example, classroom routines may involve synchronous classes beginning with calming music as students enter, following with a brief instructor-led mindfulness exercise, utilizing grounding techniques throughout the class, and allowing time for a brief prayer or meditation at the end of class. Asynchronous classes may include development of self-care plans, written reflections, and discussion posts on using self-care practices (Butler et al., 2017).

In the learner preparation process, educators can also apply the trauma-informed principles of empowerment, voice, and choice. For example, educators can support student choice by offering a preview of all course topics in advance of the class and empowering students to express their thoughts about how they wish to engage with the material (Carello & Butler, 2015; Carello, 2018). In an online environment, this could include providing multiple options to approaching the same content, such as watching a video, listening to a podcast, or reading an article. Further, students can

choose to use one or more of several methods to reflect on learning experiences, such as chat tools, discussion boards, or video clips. These choices also enable students to titrate exposure to the material they might deem traumatic by allowing them to access it asynchronously, or to turn off cameras during synchronous classes (Black, 2006; Sherwood et al., 2021). Titrating material and using coping can lower trauma disturbance and increase students' ability to self-regulate allowing them to be prepared to engage in learning (Black, 2008).

Setting the Online Climate

Next, the andragogical process focuses on creating a climate that is conducive to learning. Educators can apply the principles of safety and respect to support such an environment. This can be achieved when educators acknowledge the effects of trauma on students and provide information about the body's physical, mental, and emotional reactions to trauma (Imad, 2022). Imad (2020) asserts that traumatic stress causes the brain's limbic system to overtake the cerebral cortex, telling the brain to prioritize survival over reasoning or learning. Sharing this insight can normalize the experience and empower students. (Knight, 2010, 2019). By acknowledging the effects of trauma educators can create a safe online environment that reduces the risk of retraumatization.

The trauma-informed principle of trustworthiness and transparency also supports the development of a supportive learning environment. Recent literature shows the importance of online educators providing structure by clearly communicating class expectations and giving support through a variety of tools and resources to help students meet expectations (Hitchcock et al., 2021). Practical examples include supplying a syllabus clearly outlining course content, objectives, and expectations; distributing well-organized course material prior to weekly class meetings; and providing mini-lectures, discussion posts, and online resources (Hitchcock et al., 2021; Knowles et al., 2020). Reliable and transparent educators create an environment of consistency and predictability, which allows students to plan and prepare (Hitchcock et al., 2021; SAMHSA, 2014).

Involving Learners in the Online Learning Process

Involving learners in developing the online course, assessing their needs, and setting goals is another focus of the andragogical process. First, educators can demonstrate the principle of collaboration and mutuality to learners by being approachable and accessible (Hitchcock et al, 2021). Practically, the educator can achieve this by providing clear information about availability and preferred methods of contact, setting expectations for response times and being timely, checking in individually with students regularly through emails or video meetings, and dialoguing about learning goals and outcomes (Robinson et al., 2020; Hitchcock et al., 2021).

Educators can help students work collaboratively to develop additional guidelines for classroom interaction by encouraging students to consider both written and verbal discussions as opportunities to interact constructively. An

example guideline for discussion posts could be to comment with a connection to the material using civil and constructive feedback and a thought-provoking question. (Knowles et al., 2020). For verbal discussions, the class may use "Oops and Ouch" to quickly acknowledge when a mistake is made ("Oops") or a statement is harmful ("Ouch"), which can foster an environment of respect (Hitchcock, 2021; Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019).

Next, educators can apply the principles of support and connection to develop positive and meaningful connections among students. One way to accomplish this is to provide students with opportunities to work together to address difficult topics. For example, one study shows that when educators organized structured roundtable conversations on contentious topics such as oppression, racism, and religious discrimination online, students found it meaningful to share their ideas and experiences and respectfully listen to others' contributions (Bethel et al., 2022). Moreover, students also reported developing insight into the lived experiences of others and challenging their stereotypes toward others (Bethel et al., 2022).

Finally, educators may increase students' feelings of being supported and connected by intentionally developing opportunities for students to support one another. This was shown to be particularly important when classes moved online during the pandemic (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). One such example is a program in which participants practiced a trauma-informed approach while faculty encouraged students to connect weekly with "self-care buddies," and gave students opportunities to engage in online support groups known as "Solidarity Circles." Students reported feeling less stressed, more supported, and more connected (Barros-Lane et al., 2021, p. 77).

Designing & Evaluating Online Learning Experiences

During the final part of the andragogical process, which is designing and evaluating the learning experience, educators can apply the trauma-informed principle of resiliency and growth. Online educators can set the tone by provoking students' sense of hope for academic success by noticing their strengths and providing positive feedback (Imad, 2020). When choosing feedback methods, it is important to consider the student's needs and the objectives of the assignment. A study by Borup et al. (2015) showed that online students found text-based feedback on assignments more efficient and convenient, while video feedback was perceived as more emotionally supportive. This may be due to educators giving more specific corrections in text-based feedback while video feedback provided more positive feedback and "relationship-building" comments (Borup et al., 2015, p. 179). Therefore, educators may choose video feedback on specific assignments or at certain times to give emotional support and provide text-based feedback when more immediate and efficient responses are beneficial. When students receive ongoing, timely feedback with the opportunity to revise and resubmit assignments, educators can promote students' personal growth, positive self-esteem, and generate a feeling of being supported and cared for (Borup et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2020).

Educators may also model openness to feedback and growth themselves. This can be done by regularly eliciting feedback on activities and assignments through

online survey tools, receiving regularly scheduled anonymous evaluations, and incorporating feedback into the course (Imad, 2020).

Framing the Entire Process

Finally, the principle of social justice can be used to frame the full andragogical process (Imad, 2022), permitting educators to center the learning process on awareness of cultural, historic, and gender issues, as well as practices that promote equity. This may be beneficial in creating an environment that promotes the well-being of all students including trauma-affected, marginalized populations (Imad, 2022; Venet, 2021). Venet (2021) and Imad (2022) discuss the importance of educators placing cultural humility and equity at the center of the trauma-informed approach to move beyond merely recognizing trauma toward actively seeking to prevent trauma and promote students' flourishing (Imad, 2022; Venet, 2021).

This goal can be achieved through the provision of a culturally responsive curriculum that acknowledges students' diverse backgrounds while connecting their cultural knowledge and lived experiences with their classroom learning (Gay, 2002). The trauma-informed principle of social justice also recognizes and acknowledges the effects of trauma on historically marginalized and oppressed groups (Sherwood et al., 2021). Educators who intentionally choose culturally relevant curricula and diverse examples serve to challenge historical stereotypes of marginalized communities (Sherwood et al., 2021). They can also address current events, facilitate discussions of the impact of those events on students, and advocate for anti-racist actions (Sherwood et al., 2021).

Recent literature addressing online teaching during the pandemic provides examples of how to apply a trauma-informed culturally responsive approach (Sherwood et al., 2021). This includes being especially aware of disparities that may exist in the online environment. These may include a lack of access to the following: stable and consistent internet, academic and emotional support services, and a quiet learning environment (Sherwood et al., 2021). As a result, educators need to provide support and flexibility, which can include connecting students to online campus health services, providing technical support resources, and permitting flexibility in online interactions by allowing students to post in the chat during synchronous lectures or access recorded lectures asynchronously (Hitchcock et al., 2021). Another strategy that may decrease student stress is to give them a number of flexible "late days" to use as needed for turning in assignments past the due date after simply notifying the educator (Carello, 2018). When educators are aware of cultural, historic, and gender issues and actively promote principles of social justice, they are better able to support trauma-affected marginalized individuals throughout the entire andragogical process.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I propose that a trauma-informed approach in online education may support the learning process of trauma-affected marginalized populations by reducing their risk of experiencing retraumatization and enhancing their resiliency

and growth. Trauma-informed practices may be particularly important in the online environment to support the success of marginalized students. Such practices can be applied throughout the development of the online learning experience: from preparing the learner and the setting by creating environments of safety, respect, and empowerment to connecting and collaborating with students while designing, implementing, and evaluating the learning process. Finally, educators may use the principle of social justice throughout the process by providing a culturally responsive curriculum and learning experience. By applying trauma-informed principles and practices in the online environment educators may support the growth, development, and flourishing of trauma-affected marginalized individuals in the online learning environment.

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ALINA BOND CHAN, MSW, LCSW, is a PhD student in the Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University. Her major research interests lie in the area of trauma-informed higher education and best practices for teaching about trauma in social work education. Email: Alina_Bond1@baylor.edu