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Trauma-Informed Education
Capstone Project: “Amygdala Whisperer Coach”
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For this capstone project, I decided to focus on helping my undergraduate Education students understand the concept of an “amygdala whisperer,” or a person who can regulate their own emotional responses and - crucially - help others regulate their own emotional responses. I want the future teachers that I work with to develop their own amygdala whispering-skills, so that they can empower themselves and others to become self-regulated learners who can recognize when their stress is not productive and can utilize healthy coping strategies. My hope is that by framing this work as an important skill they should practice on behalf of their own future students, I will also help my students reflect metacognitively (is that redundant? Perhaps all reflection is metacognitive?) and develop their *own* regulation skills.

To help students practice amygdala whispering, I have developed an AI-powered simulation that I’ll share below. First, a little context: I’m planning to use this first with 24 undergraduate students enrolled in a course called *Teaching for Social Justice* in the Spring ‘25 semester. Students will have read Mays Imad’s 2022 article, “Trauma-informed education for wholeness: Strategies for faculty & advisors” before class. We’ll review the article together as a group, and then I’ll ask students - individually or in pairs - to use the simulator to practice their coaching skills with a hypothetical student. The simulator is not perfect yet (and I suspect I will not have time to perfect it), so the most important part of the learning will come towards the end of class, after we’ve tried the simulations, when we de-brief and reflect on the experience - and critique the simulator.

A quick note about the simulation: I recently completed Ethan and Lilach Mollick’s short online course, “AI In Education: Leveraging ChatGPT for Teaching” (The class is free and do-at-your-own-pace! I recommend it to the AI-curious!) and I’ve been thinking a lot about how we might apply the opportunities offered by AI to trauma-informed education. One of the most interesting possibilities seems to be the opportunity for one-on-one interaction, tutoring, and coaching. For this project, I’ve adapted one of the role-playing tools shared in the appendix of Ethan and Lilach Mollick’s 2024 article, "Instructors as Innovators: A future-focused approach to new AI learning opportunities.”

The simulator - called “Amygdala Whisperer Coach”- is instructed to move through the following steps, ideally one at a time:

1. Review the terms “coregulation” and “amygdala whisperer” with the student/user, asking the student to create metaphors that apply what they know about these concepts to different context.
2. Offer the student a choice of scenarios in which they try to support a stressed out peer or younger student.
3. Play the role of the stressed character in the simulation.
4. Offer a little coaching and feedback to the student user during the simulation.
5. At the end of the simulation, offer the student/user both positive feedback as well as concrete suggestions for improvement.
6. Conclude by asking the student to reflect on what they learned through trying the simulation.

I tentatively and nervously share a link to the simulation here.

My hope is that this simulation will allow my class to practice the skills and actions of an amygdala whisperer in a (hopefully) victimless context. As I practiced myself, I noticed that I experienced a heightened stress response: my palms got sweaty, my heart beat faster, and I felt concerned that I would tell my hypothetical student the wrong thing! I suspect that some of my own students will experience this response also, and I hope that we'll be able to notice and reflect on our own responses to the simulation. My hope is that this experience will help my students practice the skills that will allow them to approach their own future students (and themselves!) with greater empathy and more confidence in their abilities to nurture self-regulated learners.

References:

Imad, M. (2022). Teaching to empower: Leveraging the neuroscience of now to help students become self-regulated learners. *Journal of Undergraduate Neuroscience Education*, 20(2), A254.

Imad, M. (2022). Our brains, emotions, and learning: eight principles of trauma-informed teaching. *In Trauma-Informed Pedagogies: A guide for responding to crisis and inequality in higher education* (pp. 35-47). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Imad, M. (2022). Trauma‐informed education for wholeness: Strategies for faculty & advisors. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2022(177), 39-47.

Mollick, E., & Mollick, L. (2024). Instructors as innovators: A future-focused approach to new AI learning opportunities, with prompts.