Designing Early Course Safety in a Reflective Learning Environment

Anzar Khaliq - San Francisco Bay University
Dec - 2025

Introduction

This capstone project is situated in an undergraduate first-year general education course focused on life design, identity exploration, and reflective learning. The course invites students to examine their values, assumptions, and aspirations through structured reflection, dialogue, and design thinking practices. Students typically enter the course as relative strangers, yet are expected to engage in self-directed meaning-making early in the semester. As a result, the opening weeks play a significant role in shaping whether the classroom develops into a space for thoughtful engagement or remains a site of guarded participation.

The trauma-informed principle guiding this capstone is the intentional design of psychological and relational safety through transparency, collaboration, and co-creation. This capstone applies SAMHSA's trauma-informed framework, particularly principles related to safety, trustworthiness and transparency, collaboration and mutuality, and empowerment, voice, and choice, through the deliberate co-creation of psychological and relational safety in the learning environment[1]. Trauma-informed education recognizes that safety, trust, and belonging are foundational conditions for learning, particularly in environments that invite reflection, meaning-making, and interpersonal engagement[1].

Selection Rationale

My experience teaching reflective, discussion-based courses has shown that students often require several weeks before they feel comfortable engaging openly with peers or reflecting honestly on the self. Early reflections tend to remain cautious and selective, not because students lack interest or capacity, but because relational safety has not yet been established. Research in trauma-informed pedagogy similarly identifies relational trust, student agency, and transparent learning environments as central to meaningful engagement in higher education[2].

Trauma-informed scholarship emphasizes that intentional course design can reduce barriers to participation while supporting equity, belonging, and sustained engagement, particularly in higher education settings[3]. This principle was selected because it allows safety to be addressed structurally rather than left to emerge implicitly over time. By attending deliberately to how the course begins, the learning environment can support earlier engagement, clearer shared expectations, and greater student agency, while remaining aligned with the academic goals of the course.

Application Strategy

Setting:

The approach will be implemented in a small, in-person undergraduate course of approximately twenty students. The course emphasizes reflective practice, peer dialogue, and design-based learning.

Actionable Steps:

The first two weeks of the course will be structured as a guided design sprint focused on establishing shared conditions for learning. Students will be introduced to accessible trauma-informed ideas such as safety, transparency, voice, and collaboration, and invited to consider what supports honest engagement in a classroom setting[1].

Low-stakes participation activities will include brief written reflections that may remain private, paired listening exercises that emphasize summarizing rather than responding, and collective mapping of classroom values using shared visual artifacts. Art and design metaphors, such as colors gradually mixing on a canvas, will be used to illustrate how understanding of self and others develops over time through interaction rather than immediate disclosure.

The inherent power differential between instructor and students will be addressed explicitly. The co-creation process will be guided, with the instructor naming non-negotiable expectations related to care, respect, and course requirements, while inviting student input within clear boundaries. Accessibility will be embedded throughout the design sprint by offering multiple modes of participation, allowing time for processing, and making expectations explicit, consistent with inclusive trauma-informed teaching practices in higher education[2].

Expected Outcomes:

This approach is expected to establish trust earlier in the semester, reduce anxiety related to participation, and support deeper engagement through shared language and relational clarity over time[4].

Evaluation and Adaptation

The effectiveness of this approach will be monitored through observation of participation patterns, changes in the tone and depth of reflective submissions, and brief anonymous feedback collected after the initial two-week period. Mid-semester check-ins will invite students to reflect on their sense of safety, agency, and belonging within the course.

Research on trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education highlights the importance of adapting norms around disclosure, authority, and collaboration to local cultural expectations rather than assuming universal practices[5]. To support adaptation across different cultural

contexts, this design emphasizes underlying principles rather than fixed behaviors. Ongoing documentation will support refinement and sustainability across future course offerings.

Conclusion

This capstone demonstrates how trauma-informed principles can be applied through course design by treating safety and trust as intentional outcomes rather than assumed conditions. By redesigning the opening weeks of a reflective course, educators can create learning environments that support sustained engagement without compromising academic purpose. The approach underscores the value of context-sensitive, trauma-informed practices that recognize learning as a relational and human process[1].

References

1. SAMHSA. *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014).

2. Anderson, R. K., Landy, M. & Sanchez, V. Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in Higher Education: Considerations for the Future of Research and Practice. *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education* **2**, 125–140 (2023).

3. Carello, J. & Thompson, P. (eds). *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies: A Guide for Responding to Crisis and Inequality in Higher Education.* Springer Nature (2022).

4. Wells, T. Creating trauma-informed higher education classrooms: Exploring undergraduate and graduate student perceptions. *Journal of Effective Teaching in Higher Education* **6**, 97–111 (2023). https://doi.org/10.36021/jethe.v6i1.336

5. Bitanihirwe, B. & Imad, M. Gauging trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education: a UK case study. *Frontiers in Education* **8**, 1256996 (2023). https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1256996