Lesson Plan: Building Trust in Student–Staff Partnerships

Title:
Realising Trauma, Practicing Compassion & Curiosity: Building Trust in Partnership

Duration:
90 minutes

Participants:
Staff and students from UCT, UWC, and CPUT participating in the Designing for Social Justice short course

Learning Outcomes
By the end of the session, participants will be able to:
- Explain the trauma-informed principle of Realise and its relevance to partnership.
- Identify how trauma and historical context shape interactions between students and staff.
- Demonstrate communication grounded in compassion and curiosity.
- Co-create partnership norms that foster trust and shared responsibility.

Session Outline
1. Opening Activity (10 min): Check-in Circle – “How Are You Arriving?”
Participants share one word describing their current emotional state.
This normalises emotional presence and builds initial relational safety.

2. Mini-Input: Understanding "Realise" (10 min)
Facilitator explains:
- trauma’s prevalence in South African higher education
- ongoing historical and socio-economic stressors
- how trauma influences communication, trust, and authority
- why “Realise” is foundational to partnership
This section directly connects to UCT/UWC/CPUT’s distinct histories.

3. Teaching Imad’s Compassion & Curiosity (10 min)
Facilitator introduces the principles:
Compassion:
- Pausing before reacting, assuming good intentions, centring humanity.
Curiosity:
- Asking open questions, avoiding assumptions, leaning into understanding.
Participants reflect briefly on:
- When have you been misunderstood?
- When have you misinterpreted someone else?

4. Main Activity (30 min): “Curious Conversations”
Step 1 — Pairing (Staff–Student pairs)
Each pair receives a prompt:
- “Describe a time when you felt unheard or unseen in an educational space.”
- “What helps you feel safe enough to contribute openly?”
- “What makes partnership feel risky or vulnerable?”

Step 2 — Practice Compassionate Listening
The listener:

- does not interrupt
- reflects feelings, not solutions
- asks curious follow-up questions (“Can you say more about…?”)

Step 3 — Switch Roles & Debrief
Pairs discuss what it felt like to:
- be listened to with curiosity
- listen without judgement
- hear the other’s challenges
This builds mutual humanisation and dismantles hierarchical assumptions.

5. Co■Creating Trust Agreements (20 min)
Mixed groups design a Student–Staff Partnership Trust Charter with statements such as:
- “We assume positive intent while acknowledging impact.”
- “We ask before we correct.”
- “We honour lived experiences across institutions.”
- “We communicate boundaries clearly and respectfully.”
Groups present their charters and integrate them into a single collective document used throughout the shor

6. Closing Reflection (10 min)
Participants write a short reflection:
- What did you realise today about partnership?
- How will you practice compassion and curiosity moving forward?
Those who wish may share with the group.

Materials Needed
- Printed conversation prompts
- Flipchart paper for trust agreements
- Markers
- Optional: digital collaboration tool (Padlet/Miro)