Building Trust in Student–Staff Partnerships Through "Realise," Compassion & Curiosity

Introduction

The trauma-informed principle Realise asks educators to recognise the widespread impact of trauma and understand that trauma shapes how individuals engage in learning, collaboration, and institutional life. In the context of student–staff partnerships, "realise" reminds us that both students and staff bring lived experiences—historical, socio-economic, personal, and institutional—that influence trust, communication, and participation.

Mays Imad's principles of Compassion and Curiosity deepen this practice by encouraging educators to approach interactions with empathy, openness, and a willingness to ask "What happened?" instead of "What's wrong?"

Selection Rationale

As an educator involved in the Designing for Social Justice course, I work with students and staff across UCT, UWC, and CPUT—three institutions shaped by vastly different apartheid-era histories, resource structures, and cultural environments. These contexts continue to produce unequal experiences of belonging, safety, and authority.

I selected *Realise* because partnership-building often falters not due to unwillingness, but due to misinterpretations of behaviour, unspoken fears, and institutional power imbalances. By understanding trauma's impact and approaching individuals with compassion and curiosity, we can build trust and create equitable partnerships that honour all voices.

Application Strategy

Context

The setting is a tri-institutional short course where students and staff collaborate as co-designers to improve experiences of teaching, learning, and wellbeing.

Actionable Steps

1. Start with a trust-building activity that normalizes vulnerability and difference.
2. Introduce "Realise" with examples tied to the South African higher education landscape.
3. Encourage Compassion & Curiosity through dialogue protocols and reflective prompts.
4. Facilitate a structured activity where mixed student–staff teams practice "curious questioning."
5. Co-create partnership agreements that reflect trauma-informed values.

Expected Outcomes

- Greater awareness of how trauma and history shape collaboration.
- Increased empathy between students and staff.
- Improved ability to listen without defensiveness.
- Stronger foundation for equitable partnership work.

Evaluation and Adaptation

Monitoring: Discussion summaries will be shared on a Padlet where all participants can go back and reflect on discussions at a later stage.

Feedback Mechanisms: An anonymous feedback survey is available throughout the course so we can implement requests as the course is being taught.

Sustainability Plans: Have these activities built into the course and encourage participants to share and practice these activities in their own educational settings.

Conclusion

By intentionally integrating Realise, Compassion, and Curiosity, this lesson supports sustainable, trust-filled partnerships in a deeply diverse and historically complex higher education landscape. Trauma-informed approaches not only strengthen relationships; they also advance the broader goals of social justice, co-creation, and equitable power-sharing in teaching and learning.