

Trauma-Informed Learning Community (TLC) for Educational Professionals

A Conceptual Framework for Developing a Trauma-Informed Learning Community for Faculty and Staff

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DOI:10.59668/567.11197

Faculty

Trauma

Faculty Development

Learning

Learning Communities

Framework

Trauma-informed Practices



This paper seeks to provide a process for developing a trauma-informed faculty and staff learning community using Lenning et al. (2013) adapted, 4-part Learning Community Planning Framework (LCPF) as a foundation for implementing Imad's (2021) trauma-informed education framework. This innovative and collaborative trauma-informed learning community aims to disrupt an overburdened educational system for faculty and staff, guided by a trauma-based pedagogy and a collaborative structure for discretionary caring of emotional, mental, and professional needs (Gaard & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2022). The goal of this paper is to introduce how the four phases of the LCPF leverage the trauma-informed education framework as a collaborative strategy that can be modeled across university campuses to develop their very own faculty and staff led, trauma-informed learning community; which this paper is calling the TLC for Educational Professionals.

Introduction

This paper proposes a design for a trauma-informed learning community for faculty and staff (herein called educators) called the TLC for Educational Professionals (e.g., The TLC). This learning community's design will partner two frameworks to provide a shared positive, life-giving, and enriching environment between faculty and staff experiences (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999):

- Blessinger's (2015) Learning Community Planning Framework (LCPF), adapted from Lenning et al. (2013),
- Imad's (2022) trauma-informed education framework.

Through a structure for community, identity, meaning, and practice, this educator learning community aims to support and respect the resilience of all faculty and staff in higher education by delivering a sense of belonging through the communal facilitation of trauma-informed curricula, connection, and collaboration for isolated and disheartened educators (Cox & Richlin, 2004).

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has pressed higher education leaders to shuffle modalities and create ambiguous, ever-evolving policies over semesters of uncertainty and disorder. As higher education administrators work to address a slew of evolving factors, the imprecise decision-making and need to react quickly to discern which challenges are most immediate continue to add pressure on educators across all institutions of higher education, thus creating an uneasy environment (Chesley, 2021). For university faculty and staff to survive and thrive in the face of such ambiguous factors, a collaborative process to support an educator's sense of belonging and mental health should be developed.

Research continually highlights that stress among higher education faculty and staff contributes to overall dissatisfaction and can lead to burnout (Williams et al., 2022). A resilient educator learning community would provide a collaborative opportunity for colleagues to recognize how the experiences of all faculty and staff are connected and use trauma-informed teaching and learning to decrease isolation and restore self-efficacy for educators (Feng et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2022). A learning community for thoughtful practices, guided by a trauma-informed pedagogy and a collaborative structure for discretionary caring of emotional, mental, and professional needs, can disrupt an overburdened educational system for educators (Gaard & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2022). The development of self-worth and self-esteem and the chance to make constructive contributions to their institution's learning community are all essential for educators' emotional well-being (Turner & Braine, 2013). A new sense of affirmative connection will provide a positive emotional balance of resilience and mental health for faculty, staff, and student success.

This conceptual paper provides a foundation for understanding how the LCPF phases provide the framework for trauma-informed education to address the experiences of loneliness, isolation, and low morale felt by faculty and staff. This collaborative concept can provide institutions of higher education with a model for how a trauma-informed learning community can support the need for building a supportive work environment focused on safety, empowerment, community, and meaning.

TLC for Educational Professionals in Practice

Step One:

LCPF Analysis Phase (Purpose and Situation) + Trauma-Informed Education Strategy (Safety)

1. Leverage communication to help forge
2. Make intentional connections to cultivate community.

In the analysis phase, the educators should establish a distinct objective for their learning community. Those educators leading the analysis should develop a clear purpose that should question how the idea for the community started, why the community exists, what the goals are, and what the mission or purpose statement of the community is (Lenning et al., 2013). The cultivation of a safe learning environment connected through trust-building and transparent relationships with and among educators is the recommended first step in developing the TLC for Educational Professionals (Imad, 2021).

It is not surprising that higher rates of stress, burnout, low morale, and job discontent have been reported by college students, teachers, and staff in all areas of American higher education since the onset of COVID. Uncertainty, isolation, and the loss of meaning continue to be emotional triggers that all members of the higher education academy have

continued to combat since March 2020 (Imad, 2021, p. 7). University faculty and staff have been facing a prolonged state of stress on their physical, emotional, and social existences (Imad, 2021). This increased exhaustion from actions due to COVID and the mental health pandemic has disconnected faculty and staff from their original motivations for joining the higher education community. Still, the stress and chronic overwork that were already plaguing so many faculty and staff members pre-pandemic have seemingly been accepted as ordinary in many institutions across the nation, which are eager to return to what “once was” (Gaard & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2022).

Since the start of 2022, multiple reports have been published highlighting the mental health status of the nation’s higher education community. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 2021 campus survey of students, faculty and staff on the impact COVID-19 had on them showed that 72% of the faculty, and staff surveyed showed positive signs of at least one post-traumatic stress symptom (Gronert et al., 2021). What followed were a trauma informed care toolkit and workshops for students, faculty, and staff to carve out time out of their already busy schedules. In the spring and summer of 2020, the American Council on Education polled college and university presidents to better understand how they and their institutions were handling the COVID-19 pandemic. What emerged as the most pressing issue in the first (February 2021) and second (April 2021) distributions of survey results was students’ mental health. Faculty and staff’s mental health was second in the February results but was replaced by emerging enrollment concerns in the April results (Taylor et al., 2021).

Workshops, videos, and toolkits for faculty and staff to help support stronger trauma-informed learning environments for student success are needed. But like many of the recent surveys that placed great emphasis on students, faculty and staff support of their own trauma and stress is lacking. In most cases, the trauma-informed strategy is for teaching students or engaging classroom spaces for student use. Rarely are the tools and systems in place to help faculty and staff members foster a safe and connected learning environment. The lack of intentional connection between educators has become nationally pervasive and continues to elevate the necessary need for academic interdependence in stressful times (Imad, 2021). Trustworthy communication and cultivating community will help to connect how trauma-informed approaches can support the purposeful development of a trauma-sensitive faculty/staff learning community.

The goal of faculty learning communities is to provide a sense of belonging to higher education while also connecting and collaborating with other educators who may be working in isolation (Cox & Richlin, 2004). Though it seems simple to assume that the stakeholders for the TLC for Educational Professionals would be inclusive of all faculty and staff on a university campus, any sense of uncertainty could prevent educators from feeling confident in their pursuit of peer-to-peer support. Analyzing the steps needed to create a trusted and transparent process for the development of the TLC for Educational Professionals can strengthen confidence in a “safe space” that aims to tackle professional obstacles and reduce the uncertainty faculty and staff stakeholders are feeling (Imad, 2021).

Step 2:

LCPF Design Phase + Trauma-Informed Education Strategy (Empowerment):

1. Reduce uncertainty to help foster a sense of safety.

The design phase aims to determine what kind of learning community is needed, with a focus on membership, delivery, duration, and disciplinary formats (Lenning et al., 2013). The design process should focus on balancing regular communication with interested campus colleagues around the “how” and “why” of the community and what is expected of faculty voice and choice in the TLC learning outcomes (Imad, 2021, p. 12). To design the TLC for Educational Professionals with such balance, educators must first decide whether the TLC will be cohort-based or topic-based (Cox & Richlin, 2004).

Cohort-based faculty learning communities address the teaching, learning, and development needs of educators that have been especially affected by isolation, fragmentation, stress, neglect, or a cold climate in the academy (Cox & Richlin, 2004). The curriculum of a topic-based learning community is designed to meet a particular campus teaching and learning need, concern, or opportunity (Cox & Richlin, 2004). TLC for Educational Professionals aims to foster safe

connections and self-advocacy among faculty and staff on a campus. The TLC is focused on trust and combating educators' feelings of isolation and stress (Cox & Richlin, 2004). This specific faculty learning community, in collaboration with trauma-informed educational practices, should be designed as a face-to-face cohort-based community.

The TLC will be long-term, open to all faculty and staff, and flexible enough for all colleagues to come and go as they feel they need the support. If any attempt to create a vulnerable community focused on shared trauma is to have any sustainability, it is important to be open and nimble. The community leadership should respect that any time commitment could be a barrier for certain educators. A pilot educator learning community may have difficulty leveraging course reprieves for faculty or professional excuses for staff colleagues. Leadership should not get bogged down in the details and settle on a day and time with the opportunity to revisit after the pilot semester.

The TLC for Educational Professionals design should be communicated through all university educator channels (i.e., listservs, web pages, campus bulletins). In the early communication to faculty and staff, a first draft structure of goals and outcomes should be shared that focuses on the "team aspect" of support (Cox & Richlin, 2004, p. 9). This communication should highlight how the design of the TLC connects trauma-informed educational practices to faculty learning community best practices to create a framework for assisting educators in reaffirming their purpose, reforming deliberate relationships, and reconnecting with the specific meaning and community that sparked their initial purpose to be educators (Imad, 2021).

In that same early communication, examples of potential topics and strategies, intrinsically connected to the practice of trauma-informed education, could be included, but they should not be meant to be prescriptive in the emerging cohort-driven design. The educators leading the early design of the TLC should also consider providing examples of pedagogical approaches that could be explored within the learning community. For example, a biweekly, 8-session TLC for Educational Professionals schedule aligned with trauma-informed educational practices, could introduce the strategies around "reducing uncertainty to help foster a sense of safety" (Imad, 2021, p. 9) in the first session. In session two, the TLC can help educators focus on strategies for understanding what educators can "control and balance" (Imad, 2021, p. 11).

By simply introducing evidence-based strategies such as gratitude journals, "done" lists, and focusing on the process versus the outcomes of positive mental health, the educators leading the design can model through transparent communication the building, development, and core values that are expected within this learning community (Cox & Richlin, 2004).

Step 3:

LCPF Implementation Phase + Trauma-Informed Education Strategy (Community):

1. Leverage communication to help forge
2. Reaffirm or re-establish goals to create meaning.

The implementation phase is where culture is developed, core values and norms are determined, as are policies, roles, and resources (Lenning et al., 2013). The previous phases of analysis and design implement very specific trauma-informed practices to build trust and provide choices to combat the potential ambiguity that may surround such an ambitious educator learning community. At the implementation phase, early stakeholders have been identified, and the initial community experiences have begun. The TLC for Educational Professionals will provide faculty and staff with consistent professional and personal development days or hours so they can design a growth and learning culture for themselves (Gaard & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2022). Understanding the actions and initiatives that support faculty and staff's sense of belonging is imperative for a faculty learning community to thrive. Educators should take the initiative to discover the shared desires and motivations surrounding their trauma.

In order to begin implementation, faculty and staff colleagues in the community have to discover the "whys," desires, and "motivations" surrounding their trauma as educators and then move into the "how" through the principles of

trauma-informed pedagogy (Gaard & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2022). To implement the collaborative teaching and learning structure for the TLC, educators should consider using Lombardi's emerging "construction of understanding" framework for active learning possibilities (Talbert, 2022). This person-to-person approach provides an operationalized model that gives educators in the community control of their learning through active reflection and agency (Talbert, 2022). The "construction of understanding" framework aims to implement a system of dialog to help educators find meaning in their work as they might connect to trauma-informed educational practices.

To understand how Lombardi's system might work within the developing TLC for Educational Professionals structure, compare traditional learning, which takes place in a model where learning funnels through the teacher, or head of the class. In the "construction of understanding" system, educators develop their understanding through direct interaction with all the components of learning in that week's trauma-informed session, while surrounded by the ecosystem of academics and staff in the learning community (Talbert, 2022). The faculty and staff can explore the different ways they can engage with trauma-informed educational practices while providing the agency to "intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (Badura, 2001; Lombardi & Shipley, 2021, p. 15).

The "construction of understanding" framework aims to implement a system of dialog to help educators find meaning in their work as they might connect to trauma-informed educational practices. The system provides communication connections between all educators while building self-efficacy and assisting in their commitment to their own personal wellness and growth (Guin, 2004; Spurgeon & Thompson, 2018). Giving educators options and empowering them to speak up can remind them that their diverse experiences benefit everyone's learning (Iman, 2022). Educators will benefit from this structured process for active, peer-to-peer learning that provides great empathy towards their colleague's current state of mental health. Additionally, it gives the faculty and staff a sense of personal power and helps them work toward getting back to a healthier mindset (Hanson, 2018; Levine, 1997, p. 123; Imad, 2021, p. 6).

The TLC for Educational Professionals should not demand any experience in clinical psychology or social work to use this trauma-informed approach (Imad, 2021). The learning community should be human-centered, focused on the well-being and care of their faculty and staff colleagues, and in order to do that, getting the community members to meet on a regular basis is imperative.

Step 4:

LCPF Assessment Phase + Trauma-Informed Education Strategy (Meaning):

1. Reduce uncertainty to help foster a sense of safety.
2. Leverage communication to help forge trust.
3. Reaffirm or re-establish goals to create meaning.
4. Make intentional connections to cultivate community.
5. Center well-being and care.

The final phase of the LCPF asks the community to decide what evidence will be provided, what assessment format will be applied (summative or formative), and the general design of the program evaluation report (Lenning et al., 2013). The educators who take on the early leadership roles of analyzing, designing, and implementing the TLC should also take on an early leadership role in developing goals and outcomes that will guide all currently involved educators (and educators who engage later). The short-term and long-term learning community goals should be identified and then mapped to trauma-informed educational practices.

The TLC for Educational Professional's learning outcomes and goals (see Table 1) would be influenced by a similar learning community developed at California State University San Marcos (California State University San Marcos, 2021). Once created, the current educators within the TLC should communicate with the larger campus community of educators as a way to continuously communicate the invitation of the learning community to all faculty and staff members.

Table 1

Outcomes, Practices and Strategies for the TLC for Educational Professionals

Outcome	Trauma-Informed Educational Strategy (Meaning)	Initial Support Strategies
Demonstrate an understanding of how trauma can affect faculty and staff behaviors and responses within and outside the university setting.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduce uncertainty to help foster a sense of safety 2. Make intentional connections to cultivate community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help faculty and staff identify what they can control. • Help faculty and staff recognize and leverage the power of relationships.
Understand faculty/staff behaviors from a trauma-informed lens.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Center well-being and care 2. Reaffirm or re-establish goals to create meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionally and explicitly engage in positive emotions such as gratitude. • Help faculty and staff identify short-term goals that connect to their long-term "why"
Integrate trauma informed care practices into university policy and practices to reduce re-traumatization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reaffirm or re-establish goals to create meaning 2. Leverage communication to help forge trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reframe obstacles to reaffirm meaning and purpose • Remind that small actions can make a big difference

To assess the impact of the faculty learning community's goals and outcomes, educators should map Carello's (2020) Creating Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning Environments: A Self-Assessment Question for Educators to the TLC's outcomes. Carello (2020) has developed seven trauma-informed principles in support of students' trauma that can be adapted to evaluate key outcomes of the TLC educators focused on trust, connection, and educators' mental health (see Table 2):

Table 2

Draft adaptation of Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning Environments: Self-Assessment Questions (Carello, 2020)

Principle	Key Question	Specific Question Example
Physical, Emotional, Social, and Academic Safety	To what extent does the learning environment ensure the physical, emotional, social, and academic safety of educators, including feeling safe to make and learn from mistakes?	Are you attentive to signs of educator distress? Do you understand these signs in a trauma-informed way?
Trustworthiness and Transparency	To what extent do learning policies and practices maximize trustworthiness and transparency by making expectations clear, ensuring consistency in practice, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and minimizing disappointment?	How do you handle dilemmas between role clarity and accomplishing multiple tasks (e.g., navigating working on a research project with a student or serving as both advisor and course instructor)?
Support and Connection	To what extent are educators linked with appropriate peer and professional resources to help them succeed personally and professionally?	How does the university facilitate peer activities that help educators connect with their peers and provide mutual support?
Collaboration and Mutuality	To what extent do educators share common goals and share power?	Is faculty and staff accountability or impairment handled in a way that conveys "What's happened to the educator?" versus "What's wrong with the educator?"
Empowerment, Voice, and Choice	To what extent are educators viewed as experts of their own experiences and learning and as such are empowered to make choices and develop confidence and skills?	Do educators get clear, consistent, and appropriate messages about their rights and responsibilities?
Social Justice	To what extent are policies and practices responsive to issues of privilege and oppression and	In what ways are policies and practices responsive to and respectful of educators' diverse experiences and

Principle	Key Question	Specific Question Example
	respectful of diverse individual and collective experiences and identities?	identities? To which experiences and identities are they responsive?
Resilience, Growth, and Change	To what extent do policies and practices recognize and facilitate student resilience, growth, and change?	Do learning and feedback emphasize faculty and staff growth more than student deficits?

Conclusion

According to research, trauma-informed teaching and learning increase faculty and staff capacity and experience, which lowers attrition while also reducing burnout (University of Michigan School of Public Health, 2022). The TLC for Educational Professionals will engage all faculty and staff on college campuses and provide ways for educators to put contemplative practices at the center of their academic lives (Gaard & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2022). Through a model of discretionary leadership, this specific trauma-informed faculty learning community will develop a powerful group of people who can lead the practice of contemplation through collaborative dialog, trauma-informed practices, and an empathy-forward framework that, in the end, will aim to see transformational change for all faculty and staff struggling with mental health and a sense of belonging.

This learning community design focuses on the total wellbeing of the campus community using an evidence-based, effective educational framework that understands and makes use of the power of relationship through shared teaching and learning (Imad, 2021). Any evaluation of a trauma-informed faculty learning community should always take into account campus institutional policies and practices in order to ensure a positive and sustainable collective of educational professionals can thrive. Intentionality should be given to the tone and rhetoric of the university in relation to what emerges from the learning community's understanding of their own informed trauma (Gaard & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2022). This collaboration between the educators who make time for the learning community and university leadership's understanding of the intended impact of the learning community must be collaborative, patient, and provide opportunities for shared reflection of the learning impact that will occur when the TLC for Educational Professionals is established on their campuses.

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