

# Using Shared Google Docs to Co-Create Life-Affirming Learning

## A Case of Trauma-Informed Instructional Design at the Tertiary Level

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Engagement

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Co-creation

Affective Experiences



*In Spring 2022, we (faculty member and undergraduate student) co-facilitated an undergraduate education course. To support and affirm all participants as whole beings who were both navigating trauma and developing as learners and people, we co-created between us and with enrolled students numerous shared Google Docs. We used these Docs to: (1) ground ourselves and map our intentions and plans as co-facilitators; (2) create structures for student engagement and organization; and (3) ensure that affective experiences were integral to course content and processes. We describe these uses and offer recommendations for educators interested in adapting this design strategy.*

## Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic extended into its third year, the trauma students in colleges and universities experienced intensified rather than abated. All students in these institutions were strained by the uncertainty, exhaustion, fear, and loss caused by the pandemic itself (Ezarik, 2022). In addition, some students experienced the pandemic's intersection with other sources of trauma, such as systemic racism, which added to and exacerbated existing injustices (Clayton, 2021; Imad, 2021). These wider realities, as well as careful attention to the particular group of enrolled students, shaped a trauma-informed instructional design practice that we, a faculty member (Alison) and student co-facilitator (Van), developed in an undergraduate education course at one tertiary-level institution. This practice included the co-creation and three related uses of numerous shared Google Docs:

1. To ground ourselves and map our intentions and plans as co-facilitators of the course;
2. To create structures for enrolled student engagement and organization; and
3. To ensure that affective experiences were integral to course content and processes.

This practice was not only responsive to enrolled students' particular needs and contextualized within the wider realities of the recent pandemic and ongoing systemic inequities. It was also situated in expanding understandings of trauma. While research on trauma has traditionally focused on the experiences of war veterans and survivors of childhood trauma, notions of "trauma-informed care" have expanded to recognize the impact of a wide range of traumatic experiences on individuals across contexts, including schools (Thomas et al., 2019). In contrast to early conceptions of trauma, which labeled victims as morally weak, trauma-informed practice in educational contexts avoids approaching students from a deficit perspective and emphasizes empathy (Thomas et al., 2019). Brunzell and colleagues (2019) offer a "practice pedagogy" that includes attention to "aspects of healing (i.e. trauma-informed practice) and growth (i.e. wellbeing-informed practice) in the classroom" (p. 601). The trauma-informed instructional design approach we discuss here is an example of empathetic, healing-attentive, and growth-centered practice, and it was designed to be responsive to the particular trauma students enrolled in our course were experiencing.

To make the use of co-created, shared Google Docs healing and affirming, rather than harmful, we were intentional about creating "a safe, supportive, and trauma-sensitive classroom environment" (Hanover Research, 2019, p. 1). We created this environment by inviting every student to complete a Course Commitment Form to be shared with us as co-facilitators, revised as needed, and used to self-evaluate. This approach reflects three of the six key principles of a trauma-informed approach identified by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014): 1.) trustworthiness and transparency; 2.) collaboration and mutuality; and 3.) empowerment, voice, and choice. We also asked students to submit an Access Needs Form to inform us of learning differences they might have, supports they needed, and ways in which differences could be resources to themselves and one another (Cook-Sather, 2019, 2022). This approach embraces empathy rather than deficit thinking (Thomas et al., 2019) and reflects additional SAMHSA (2014) principles: safety; moving past historical biases and stereotypes; and recognizing and addressing historical trauma. Finally, course assignments included weekly entries in personal journals to which Alison offered weekly, written responses, contributions to a collective annotated bibliography, fieldwork projects, research studies, and portfolios. All assignments endeavored to support life-affirming learning opportunities designed to ensure that social and emotional content were integrated with subject-specific content of the course—goals Van often pursued through out-of-class dialogue with and support of students.

After we provide a brief history of the course and introduce ourselves, we describe three related uses of the numerous shared Google Docs we co-created, and we offer recommendations for educators across institutional contexts and courses who might be interested in adapting this design strategy. As part of our ongoing process of trauma-informed, self-care practice, our writing process has also been on a co-created, shared Google Doc on which we drafted and revised as well as invited enrolled students to comment.

## **History of Focal Course and Our Identities as Co-Facilitators**

The course we co-facilitated in the Spring-2022 semester was called "Exploring and Enacting Transformation of Higher Education." This undergraduate education course (previously called "Advocating for Diversity in Higher Education") was co-created in 2015 by Alison and then-undergraduate Crystal Des-Ogugua (Cook-Sather et al., 2018). It employs anti-racist pedagogy (Wilson & Cook-Sather, 2022), is always co-facilitated by a faculty member and an undergraduate student of color, and is co-created with all enrolled students each time it is offered (Cook-Sather, 2022). From the outset, the goal of this course was to make space for students to put their lived experiences into dialogue with published work and with other students' lived experiences in order to explore, advocate for, and enact diversity, equity, and inclusion in the course, and in higher education more broadly. The course typically enrolls approximately 20 students.

Who we are also informed how we co-created a trauma-informed learning space and practice in this course. Alison, a tenured faculty member who identifies as a middle-aged, white, cis-gendered female, has taught this course numerous times since co-creating it with Crystal and sees it as a manifestation of the pedagogical partnership work that constitutes her primary area of research and practice (<https://www.alisoncooksather.com/>). This work is premised on collaboration, mutuality, empowerment, voice, and choice, and it specifically strives to redress the epistemic, affective, and ontological harms many equity-denied students experience in higher education (de Bie et al., 2021). Van, a third-year student (at the time we co-facilitated the course) who identifies as a non-binary, first-generation, Vietnamese American, completed the course in Spring of 2021 and co-facilitated it in Spring of 2022 while conducting an independent study on embodiment pedagogy. Doing trauma-informed work with and for one another as facilitators was essential for us to be able to create a space for students to do analogous work of self-care and life-affirming learning (Imad, 2021).

## Discussion of Design Choice to Use Multiple, Shared, Co-created Google Docs

During the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years, a great deal of teaching and learning unfolded via virtual platforms such as Zoom. It was a matter of necessity to find ways for faculty and students to engage with subject matter and its application. Our use of multiple, co-created, shared Google Docs was not necessarily required for those purposes. We felt, however, that using Google Docs was critical to creating a trauma-informed planning process and a trauma-informed learning environment for several significant reasons:

- For ourselves as co-facilitators, specifically to a.) ground ourselves emotionally and b.) to develop our intentions and plans;
- To create structures for student engagement and organization through a.) making outlines of all class sessions for students, b.) mapping responses to subject-matter-focused resources, and c.) brainstorming strategies, approaches, reactions, and recommendations; and
- To ensure that affective experiences were integral to course content and processes through a.) pooling hopes and aspirations for the course, b.) recording student responses to “checking-in” prompts, and c.) capturing insights and inspirations.

## Using a Shared, Co-created Google Doc for Ourselves as Co-facilitators

Imad (2021) contends that it is critical for those facilitating learning to engage in self-care if they are going to be able to facilitate students’ self-care. In her discussion of what teachers need to manage their own trauma while supporting students, she writes:

*A calm nervous system can help calm other people’s nervous systems. And when our nervous system is calm, we are able to engage socially, be productive, and process new information in order to continue to learn and grow—and to feel we are living meaningful and fulfilled lives. (p. 2)*

To calm our nervous systems and to plan class sessions for each week of the course, we met on each Sunday afternoon during the semester we co-facilitated “Exploring.” Our collaboration began via Zoom, and as we talked, we used a single, co-created, shared Google Doc to record our hopes for the course overall and also to draft plans for specific components of each class session. This Doc, shared only between the two of us, captured emotional as well as practical aspects of our experiences. Bringing the social as well as intellectual into a single conversation space built trust, connection, and care that was palpable to both of us: we felt safe with and supported by one another.

Because our goal for this course was to foster this kind of community for students, to construct such a space intentionally for ourselves allowed us to experience expressions of who we are and what we brought to our co-facilitation, and to affirm those out loud and in the Doc. The process of engaging in this way contributed to our continued growth and capacity to be flexible and responsive in relation to our collaboration with one another and in

relation to students. We used this space to acknowledge our positionalities and how they informed our perceptions. These perceptions, in turn, informed our choices to push forward or step back on certain topics, and to engage in particular ways with individual students or groups. This use of a shared, co-created Google Doc allowed us to develop a “practice pedagogy” that consistently attended to the aspects of healing and growth that Brunzell and colleagues (2019) call for.

The following two aspects of our use of this co-created, shared Google Doc were always mutually informing, not linear, but we distinguish them to clarify for readers the ways they informed one another.

## Grounding Ourselves as Co-facilitators

Our primary goal as co-facilitators was to address the needs and concerns of students. However, to do that well, we needed to attend carefully to the extent of our own capabilities. Using our meetings and co-creation of the Google Doc as a way to check in with one another both provided us with support and generated more ways in which we could enact trauma-informed care and facilitation for students. This kind of collaborative work is trauma informed and healing centered, and it allowed us to facilitate in ways that were also trauma informed and healing centric. Enacting this form of care is engaging in healing.

## Discussing, as Co-Facilitators, Our Intentions and Plans

Building on the grounding of ourselves as co-facilitators we describe above, we used the co-created, shared Google Docs to map out daily plans, which included: consistent components of each class session (e.g., check-in times); estimated times after each segment of a class session; which one of us would be responsible for facilitating any given segment; and reflective questions and substantive points we wanted to be sure to raise under each segment. This use of co-created, shared Google Docs not only allowed us to generate the detailed plans we wanted to have so that we could focus our energy on engaging with students, they also provided detailed documents to return to and build on for subsequent class sessions to ensure continuity.

In these two ways, the co-created, shared Google Docs kept us connected and attentive to ourselves and to one another, as well as consciously aware of and attentive in our planning for an organization of students’ learning experiences.

## Using Shared, Co-created Google Docs to Create Structures for Student Engagement and Organization

Our second use of co-created, shared Google Docs reflects how we endeavored to respond to students’ need for structure and organization because of the effects of trauma they were experiencing without imposing prescription and rigidity. As noted in Hanover Research’s (2019) “Best Practices for Trauma-informed Instruction,” supporting students experiencing trauma “requires creating a safe, supportive, and trauma-sensitive classroom environment” (p. 1). The physical and psychological environment should be a “welcoming and organized space” (p. 1) that includes “similar daily structures, reliable warmth, clear and consistent expectations, and predictability” (p. 4).

In addition to our awareness that students needed structure for engagement and organization, we had learned during our initial Zoom meetings with the class that enrolled students had different modes of and needs in learning, such as the use of the captioning while on Zoom. This specific understanding of the students enrolled, along with the general knowledge of students’ need for supportive structure, informed our decision to develop a set of co-created, shared Google Docs in the form of:

- Outlines of class sessions
- Maps of responses to subject-matter-focused resources
- Collections of strategies, approaches, reactions, and recommendations in relation to course assignments.

In using these co-created, shared Google Docs to create a safe, supportive, welcoming space, we insisted that everyone’s perspective and input counts and matters. We were affirming what students brought to the course, which helped students affirm themselves and experience empowerment, voice, and choice (SAMHSA, 2014). The structures

we created, designed to include everyone, both sent a message that people matter and demonstrated it in what students offered and what they gained through contributing. While we consistently provided these structures in class sessions, not everyone always participated; there was always choice.

## Making Outlines of All Class Sessions for Students

After we planned our own weekly outline of class sessions, we created versions of these in Google Docs for enrolled students that included time to be spent on each segment of the session. These versions also included links to resources to be drawn on before, during, and after each class, but they did not include some other information (e.g., substantive points we wanted to be sure to make). Having a clear agenda for the day “increases predictability and decreases student stress” (Hanover Research, 2019, p. 4). While we did not always stick to times allocated for each segment of the class session, the time windows were intended to provide structure. Our outlines also responded to student interests and created a sense of stability, follow through, and reliability. Many, but not all, students followed along on the Google Doc outline during class, used it to access resources, and consulted it after class to follow up on ideas or resources shared (or to catch up if they had missed class).

## Mapping Responses to Subject-matter-focused Resources

Another set of shared Google Docs we co-created for structure and organization was generated in response to subject-matter-focused resources that all students read, watched, or listened to in preparation for class sessions. As a way of reviewing content and making connections to course themes and students’ individual work, we created Google Docs for each class session with sections, prompts, or questions to which all students responded in real time during class (or to which we added students’ responses if they wanted to focus only on speaking). The experience of watching everyone type collectively contributed to the community building—sitting in a circle, feeling everyone’s energy focused on adding their responses and insights, and seeing everyone’s words weave together on the Docs. Enacting another form of trauma-informed practice, this use of co-created, shared Google Docs contributed to “community-building curricula” (Hanover Research, 2019, p. 3), valued students’ experiences and perspectives, and conveyed that those experiences and perspectives can contribute to everyone’s learning.

## Brainstorming Strategies, Approaches, Reactions, and Recommendations

A final set of shared Google Docs that we co-created for structure and organization collected strategies, reactions, and recommendations regarding students’ individual work on major assignments for the course, such as fieldwork and research projects. We created shared Google Docs on which all enrolled students could pool their thoughts and affirm one another’s efforts at different moments. These moments included while students were preparing to undertake fieldwork and research projects, as they were in the midst of working on each, and once the work on each was completed. This set of Docs became a collection of both practical advice and affective support for student engagement in, and work for, the course. Enrolled students embraced and enacted a generative combination of introspection and sharing, which was nurtured as much by the comfortable silence in which we wrote together as by what we ended up sharing out loud.

## Using Shared, Co-created Google Docs to Ensure that Affective Experiences Are Integral to Course Content and Processes

Our third use of co-created, shared Google Docs addressed specifically our recognition that students needed us and one another to pay attention to the social and emotional aspects of their learning. As Imad (2021) notes, “in our society in general, and in higher education in particular, we often view emotions as the antithesis of reason. Yet the role of emotions in the human experience, including learning and healing, is indispensable (Damasio, 2000, p. 13).”

Centering well-being and care can help facilitators of student learning stay healthier themselves, and it can also support student well-being (Imad, 2021). Trauma-informed teaching includes creating “meaningful, positive teacher-student relationships, which helps students feel safe and supported to learn” (Hanover Research, 2019, p. 1). Our emphasis on the affective is supported by recent research on the potential of co-creation, or pedagogical partnership, to redress the

harms inflicted on students from equity-seeking groups who experience a range of violences in higher education (de Bie et al., 2021).

The use of shared, co-created Google Docs designed to ensure that affective experiences were integral to course content and processes included: a.) pooling hopes and aspirations for the course; b.) recording student responses to “checking-in” prompts, and c.) capturing insights and inspirations. All of these were about making space for students and facilitators to share feelings, lived experiences, struggles, and successes. These methods recognize the importance of attending to needs on the human level and prioritizing how responding to those needs can inform learning in the class. They conveyed care for students’ well-being, and made students feel that they belonged in the course and mattered to others.

## Pooling Hopes and Aspirations for the Course

During the first several sessions of the course, we used a co-created, shared Google Doc to record hopes and aspirations for the semester. These processes of pooling hopes and co-creating classroom community guidelines paralleled the co-creation of intentions that we engaged in as co-facilitators. They unfolded at the intersection of two trauma-informed practices: co-creating “a safe, supportive, and trauma-sensitive classroom environment” and co-creating “community-building curricula” (Hanover Research, 2019, p. 1, p. 3). Having a Google Doc as a physical manifestation of the work of co-creation offered further affirmation of the time we spent enjoying and celebrating—ways of being not traditionally embraced in higher education, but that promote a sense of accomplishment and value.

## Recording Student Responses to “Checking-in” Prompts

We opened nearly every class session with a check-in prompt—a practice that is as important for facilitators as for students (Imad, 2021). The table below presents several examples of the kinds of prompts we offered and the questions themselves (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Kinds and Examples of Checking-in Prompts*

Kinds of Questions	Examples of questions
Open ended and interpretive	“If you had to choose a color to capture how you are feeling today, what color would it be and why?” “If you were to describe yourself as a form of weather, what weather would you be right now?”
Self-awareness and self-care	“Today I feel stressed by _____ and energized by _____” “Something that is sustaining me right now is _____.”
Linked to students’ lived, affective, and epistemic experiences	“For what are you grateful or what you have been gifted in higher education/college?” “How do you keep grounded in the final weeks of a semester?”

This use of check-in prompts and our collection of responses into shared Google Docs is another way of giving space for students to be heard, to feel important, and to attend to “aspects of healing and growth (Brunzell et al., 2019).

## Capturing Insights and Inspirations

The final use of shared, co-created Google Docs we share here focused on ensuring both that affective experiences were integral to course content and that processes we employed afforded students an opportunity to step back, reflect on, and capture what they were taking away (from a particular activity, class session, or the course as a whole). For example, we used snowball activities to ensure that students had embodied, community-building, affirming, and encouraging learning experiences and that insights from these experiences were captured in multiple shared Google Docs. Snowball activities were first enacted in person where each person in the room wrote on a piece of paper a response to a prompt (e.g., “What are you appreciating and what are you carrying forward from this course?”), crumpled it up, and threw it into the middle of the room. Then, everyone picked up a piece of paper and uncrumpled it. Next, we went around in a circle reading aloud what was written with no framing or comments. Following that sharing, we

discussed what we heard. Finally, one of us transcribed the student responses onto a shared Google Doc. Approaches such as this were very well received by the enrolled students and contributed to both classroom camaraderie and “community-building curricula” (Hanover Research, 2019, p. 3).

## Implications and Recommendations

The uncertainty, exhaustion, fear, and loss caused by the pandemic (Ezarik, 2022), and the intersections some students experience in higher education with other sources of trauma that add to and exacerbate injustices (Clayton, 2021; Imad, 2021), require a rethinking of how we structure and support student engagement in our courses (both virtually and in-person). The use of multiple co-created, shared Google Docs as a form of trauma-informed instructional design emphasizes empathy (Thomas et al., 2019) by integrating affective experiences into subject-matter explorations. As we have noted throughout our discussion, this method includes attention to both healing and growth (Brunzell et al., 2019).

As we have described in the sections above, this design approach supports facilitators and enrolled students in co-creating life-affirming learning by making social and emotional as well as subject-matter content accessible to everyone, before, during, and after class sessions. The approach also contributes to notions of what it means to be present (virtually and in-person). There was a high level of trust because of our classroom dynamic and previous relationships. Because students came in with a certain level of trust, and because we were intentional about co-creating a safe and supportive learning environment, it was easier for students to “buy into” the work. Such buy-in is not always as achievable for those who have experienced trauma. We urge others to consider the importance of trust and trust building, as well as the implications of anonymous contributions and feedback.

We also encourage others to consider the ways in which we used co-created, shared Google Docs to provide structures to ensure participants constantly saw what they and everyone contributed. We were careful to balance choice, autonomy, initiative, accountability, structure, and guidance—practices consistent with SAMHSA’s (2014) concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. Working as co-facilitators, and even designating ourselves facilitators rather than teachers, contributed to the dynamic. Both structures and choices extended beyond the classroom through the use of the co-created, shared Google Docs. When there was silence, or struggle, there were other spaces—outside of the actual classroom. The Google Docs could be a space students entered when they needed to in these moments or later. Furthermore, the Docs offered possible next steps in the particular set of experiences we had planned but also made it possible to sit in silence and uncertainty—just to be—in another dimension of time/space/presence. Often times, those affected by trauma are on an alert response (Imad, 2021), and sitting in silence can be a form of healing. This practice once again links trauma-informed care and healing-centered engagement.

The trauma that students experienced has intensified rather than subsided as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to drag on. As more traumatizing events unfold in the world, we need even more attention to students’—and facilitators’—experiences. We used this design strategy in the context of a small, selective, liberal arts college and a small, co-created, undergraduate course. However, the use of co-created, shared Google Docs could work in a course in any institutional context with any number of enrolled students if facilitators are intentional about creating a safe and trusting learning environment, and take into consideration the recommendations and cautions we have offered. We therefore issue this call to action: Make space for and affirm being as a way to acknowledge trauma and extend grace and love, and consider design strategies such as the development of shared Google Docs to co-create life-affirming learning.

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