**FACILITATING A SOTL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR TEACHING IN A TRAUMA-SENSITIVE CLASSROOM**

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In this paper we discuss How can we support teachers in enhancing student learning and creating a welcoming learning environment in a trauma-sensitive classroom?

Refugee learners carry diverse experiences of displacement, having been through a trauma as a result of conflict in their homeland. Since trauma affects students’ capacity to learn and develop academic skills, it is even more important to provide tailored support to faculty who teach them.

We present the case study of building a faculty learning community, or a community of practice among faculty in the university weekend and preparatory program for refugees (OLIve) in Budapest and Berlin in AY 2020-2021.

I will briefly discuss the context of trauma informed teaching, introduce the case study – open learning initiative (OLIve) and our approach, and conclude with implications for learners, teachers, institutions, as well as academic developers.

**So what does it meant to be trauma informed?**

Being trauma informed requires recognising and understanding how trauma influences individuals and, in education, designing teaching and learning environments in a way that meets students’ needs. This means establishing trust, encouraging collaboration and empowerment, as well as ensuring safety and flexibility in classroom management. The research shows that trauma is a strong predictor of academic failure; it is connected to low student engagement and poor academic performance. Trauma also affects students’ capacity to learn and develop academic skills. It affects students’ self-regulation skills and makes it harder for students to focus, maintain attention, plan, remember and organise new information, problem solve or follow instruction. Since students with traumatic history often feel low self-esteem, anxiety, and lack of control, creating a safe learning environment is crucial for student learning. To achieve this, some trauma-sensitive norms that can be introduced include ensuring an orderly physical environment, predictable classroom routines, multiple ways to participate and respond, active supervision, clear norms and expectations, and being prepared to offer additional support to students.

Teachers play a vital role in providing mental health and psychosocial support to students – they are the ones identifying and responding to students’ needs. However, working with trauma-sensitive classrooms and trauma-affected learners makes the teachers vulnerable to the effects of trauma, and keeping the balance between empathy and overidentification is critical. This is why supporting teachers in a trauma-sensitive classroom is crucial.

**Let me first briefly describe the context of the Open Learning Initiative.**

Open Learning Initiative (OLIve) started in 2016 at Central European University in Budapest, following the 2015 refugee crisis. It runs two non-degree programs, OLIve Weekend Program and OLIve University Preparatory Program (OLIve-UP). The Weekend Programme is designed for asylum seekers and refugees in Hungary, aiming to provide access to education, job market training, and English language skills. OLIve-UP is a full-time, one year, fully funded university preparatory program for people with refugee status. The aim of the program is to develop and strengthen students’ academic skills that are necessary to apply, get accepted to, and succeed in a graduate program in English.

Both programs are based on small groups, tutorials, and student-centred teaching, focusing especially on creating an inclusive and welcoming learning environment. To address the diversity and ensure inclusiveness, the teaching methods include careful scaffolding, individualised approach and feedback, as well as tailoring the materials towards students’ interest and backgrounds. It also includes diverse learning activities and assignments, so that students can demonstrate their learning in various ways.

**How did we support OLIve teachers?**

We approached supporting teachers by facilitating a community of practice, building on the developmental model suggested in Weston & McAlpine. The model describes faculty growth continuum along the three phases: 1) growth in own teaching; 2) dialogue with colleagues about teaching and learning and 3) growth in scholarship of teaching. It is worth noting that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the teaching was done online, which was an additional challenge both for teaching, and creating and facilitating a CoP.

Following the developmental model, the sharing and development process in OLIve CoPs included three stages:

* Online asynchronous reflection and sharing practice (and student progress in OLIve-UP) ahead of the synchronous meeting; Teachers were invited to share personal reflections, teaching dilemmas, and effective teaching practices in a simple template. They were invited to reflect on any teaching strategies they were using to address a particular challenge or aim – for instance building a friendly class atmosphere and fostering collaboration; talking about sensitive topics; understanding what it means to come prepared to the class or participate.
* This was followed by a synchronous facilitated meeting where we would engage in peer learning through discussion and brainstorming of teaching strategies to address current challenges. Beyond brainstorming the solutions as a group, these meetings also served as an important introduction to SoTL. This is where the role of academic developers was essential – by helping to put dilemmas and teaching practices in the education research context and by contributing solutions and best practices from the scholarship to either validate or further improve teaching solutions gained from teachers’ personal experiences.
* And the final stage would be collaboration and growth in scholarship of teaching.

**Finally, what did we learn?**

Several important implications emerged from fostering OLIve CoP that had a positive impact on learners and teachers.

*Implications for learners*

Opportunity to have professional conversations about teaching in a sensitive context especially during the pandemic enabled teachers to form a more nuanced understanding about their learners’ needs and about the teaching context.

Group sessions and reflections enabled teachers to gather information from each other about their students’ learning context and their specific life situations and challenges. For example, one of the dilemmas discussed in the sessions in OLIve-WP was that many students stopped handing in homework assignments. Through discussions it became clear that many of them lacked a quiet study space at home to focus on learning, lacked devices, or had to give up on homework time for caregiving tasks or extra jobs. As a result, many students had to take time from their regular work to prepare for classes, which impacted the quality of work handed in. This prompted discussions about redesigning the courses to introduce more blended and asynchronous learning formats, as well as re-adjusted workload to account for the changing context.

*Implications for teachers*

OLIve CoP initiative contributed to the individual development of educators prompting them to move along the level of complexity in teaching practices, as well as entering into professional discussions with colleagues and engaging with SoTL.

In addition to collegial support, CoP in OLIve-UP resulted in cross course collaboration in order to enhance student learning and the quality of assignments, which was important for student motivation and self-esteem. For instance, English language teachers would design shared assignments. In one course where students were practising verbal skills they were interviewing each other. This interview was then taken as a basis for practising writing narratives in a different English language course. In the same way English course assignments followed the assignments in disciplinary tutorials: in English courses students would practise paraphrasing using the literature they need for their final paper in the tutorial. This synergy among assignments and across courses was planned and discussed in monthly meetings, but also individually between teachers in related courses. Clearly, this also had impact on student learning, as they had the opportunity to practice their skills from different lenses, and to get tailored feedback on their work from different perspectives.

*Implications for Strengthening the Community of Practice*

The positive experiences of CoP in OLIve-WP resulted in institutionalising this process as a regular professional development option for teachers. The core group of teachers who teach in the program for several semesters, have the opportunity to capitalise on their previous experience to introduce novice teachers to the specificities of OLIve context.

*Implications for Academic Development*

Academic developers were essential to facilitate the evolution of community-building and individual professional development of teachers. While individual reflections on teaching are essential, they would not necessarily prompt teachers to engage in SoTL or develop along the complexity of teaching practices. It is also important to observe that the CoP model was also effective in an online setting. The combination of synchronous meetings with asynchronous sharing and documentation of practices provided forums for much needed flexible engagements with colleagues in the CoP.

In conclusion, the discussed approach is relevant for a trauma sensitive classroom, but also more broadly for building CoP and supporting faculty - also beyond the challenging pandemic context.

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