



TRAUMA - INFORMED PEDAGOGY

TEACHING IN VUCA TIMES

(Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous)

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If has never been more difficult to teach in higher education than in our current moment. Nearly

RADICAL HOPE

kevin m. gannon

a teaching manifesto

all of our postsecondary institutions, two- and four-year colleges, and

"A must-read... This work isn't about reform, but transformation."

—Joel Katz Vines, author of *This is Not a Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class, and Education*

market-driven ideology with little room for the notion of a public good. In our classrooms, many of which exhibit the

“Teaching is a radical act of hope. It is an assertion of faith in a better future in an increasingly uncertain and fraught present. It is a commitment to that future even if we can't clearly discern its shape.”

– Kevin M. Gannon, 2020

Caveat Audiens

“Let the listener beware”

- ▶ I have no academic background in public health, physiology, psychology, neurological science, behavioural science etc.
- ▶ I am an educator, passionate about transformative teaching and learning even amidst the pandemic.

What are the learning goals?

- By the end of this presentation, participants should be able to:
 - i. Explain trauma and its impact on students, instructors and consequently, on teaching and learning;
 - ii. Identify and implement practical strategies to mitigate the impact of trauma in order to ensure effective teaching and learning (improve learning among students).

ASSUMPTIONS

trauma's impacts

Stress and trauma **redirect our brains** toward **survival mode** and away from **executive functions**.

trauma's impacts

Executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks **successfully**. -Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University

How We "Deal" with Trauma?



Physical

Emotional

Behavioural

Cognitive

<https://fampsy.org/psychological-trauma>

How do these reactions/ responses affect our students' ability to learn?

“Amygdala Hijack”



Less active Hippocampus, ↓ Memory
More active Amygdala, ↑ Stress response

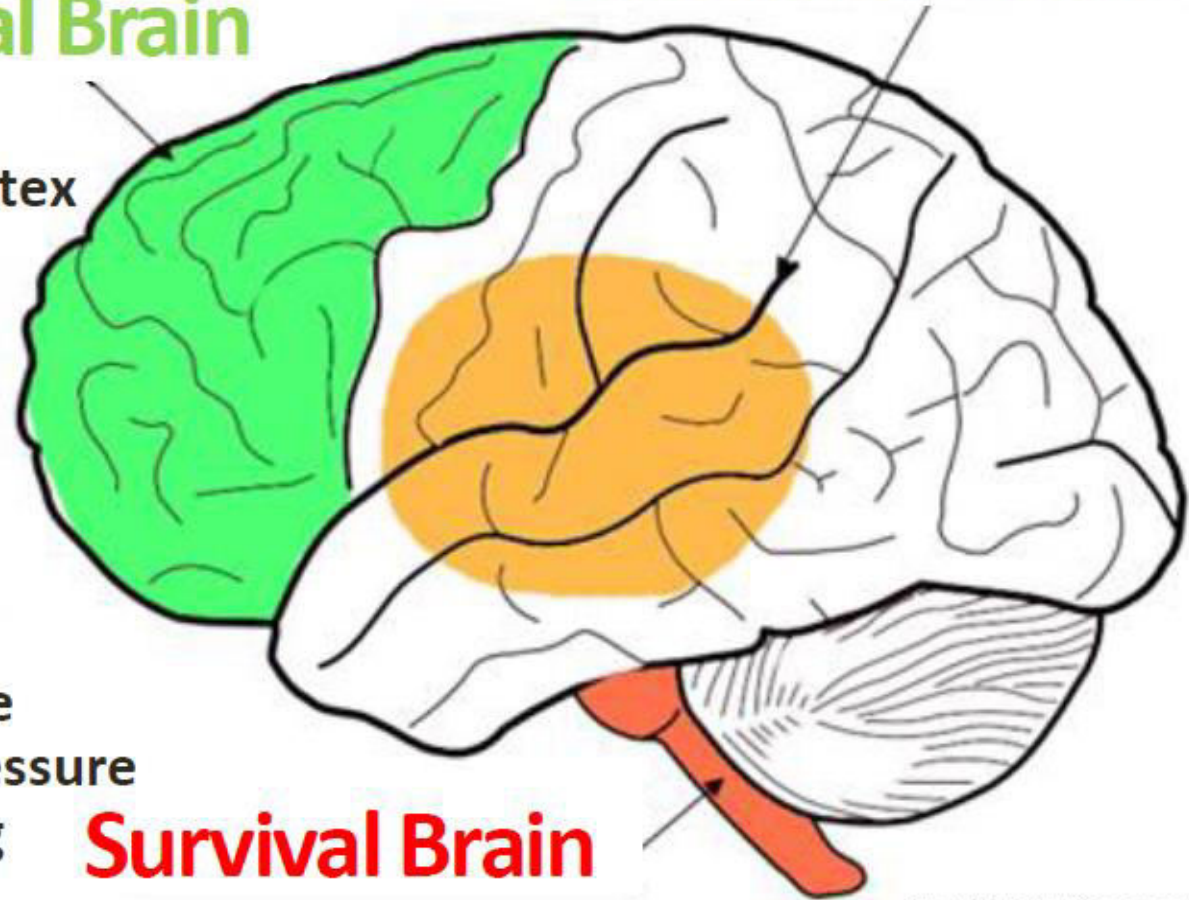
Emotional Brain

Rational Brain

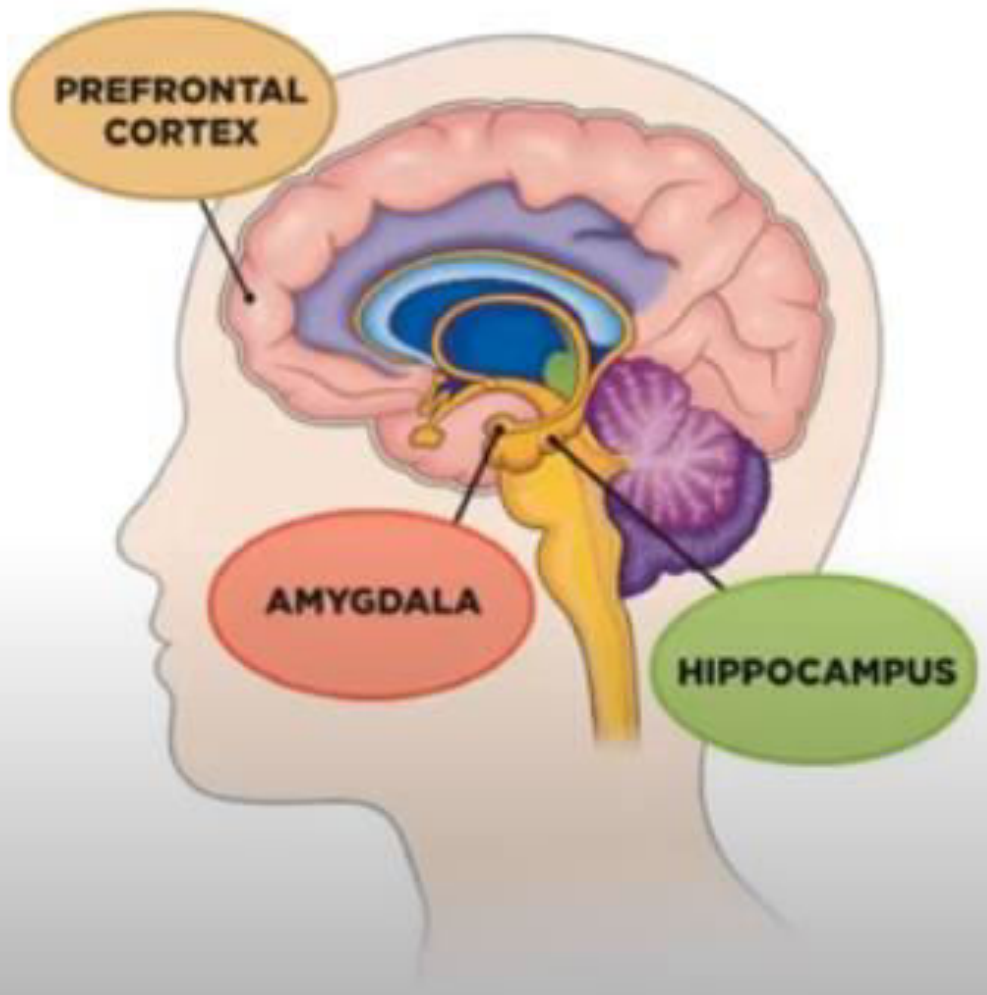
Less active
prefrontal cortex
↓ Attention
↓ Memory
↓ Decision-Making

More active
↑ Heart rate
↑ Blood Pressure
↑ Breathing

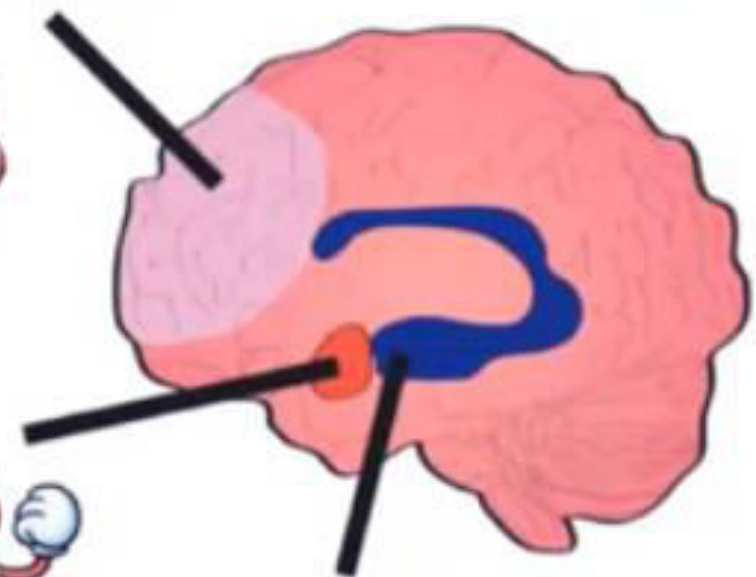
Survival Brain



Trauma & the Brain



THE PREFRONTAL CORTEX
HELPS US MAKE GOOD CHOICES,
PAY ATTENTION AND LEARN



THE HIPPOCAMPUS
HELPS US REMEMBER
WHAT WE LEARN AND
STORES OUR MEMORIES



THE AMYGDALA HELPS
KEEP US SAFE IT IS
WHERE ALL OF OUR
EMOTIONS COME FROM
BUT SOMETIMES IF WE
HAVE STRONG EMOTIONS,
IT KEEPS US FROM
THINKING CLEARLY





“Amygdala Hijack”

Hyperactive amygdala →

Stress Hormones →

Fight or Flight Response →

Impairs Our Ability to Pay Attention,
Make Decisions, Learn, & Remember



➤ Trauma impairs our ability to make decisions, remember and learn

Students may find it difficult to:

- Keep track of changes (abrupt) made by Instructors/ Lecturers in the various courses;
- Make decisions about learning;
- Remain motivated to study;
- keep on track;
- Prioritise assignments;
- Engaging with peers or the course content;
- Managing their time in an unstructured environment;
- Decide not to quit/ attrite.

What is Trauma?

“Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.”

– American Psychological Association, 2014

What is Trauma?

- ▶ No universal definition of trauma
- ▶ Trauma is an **event, series of events, or set of circumstances** that is experienced by an individual as **physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening** and that has **lasting adverse effects** on the individual's functioning and **mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual** well-being.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Website

Most definitions of trauma

Smyth and Greyber (2013) observe that “woven into each definition is the concept of an event combined with an individual's perception of and reaction to an event” (p. 26).



COVID – 19 PANDEMIC

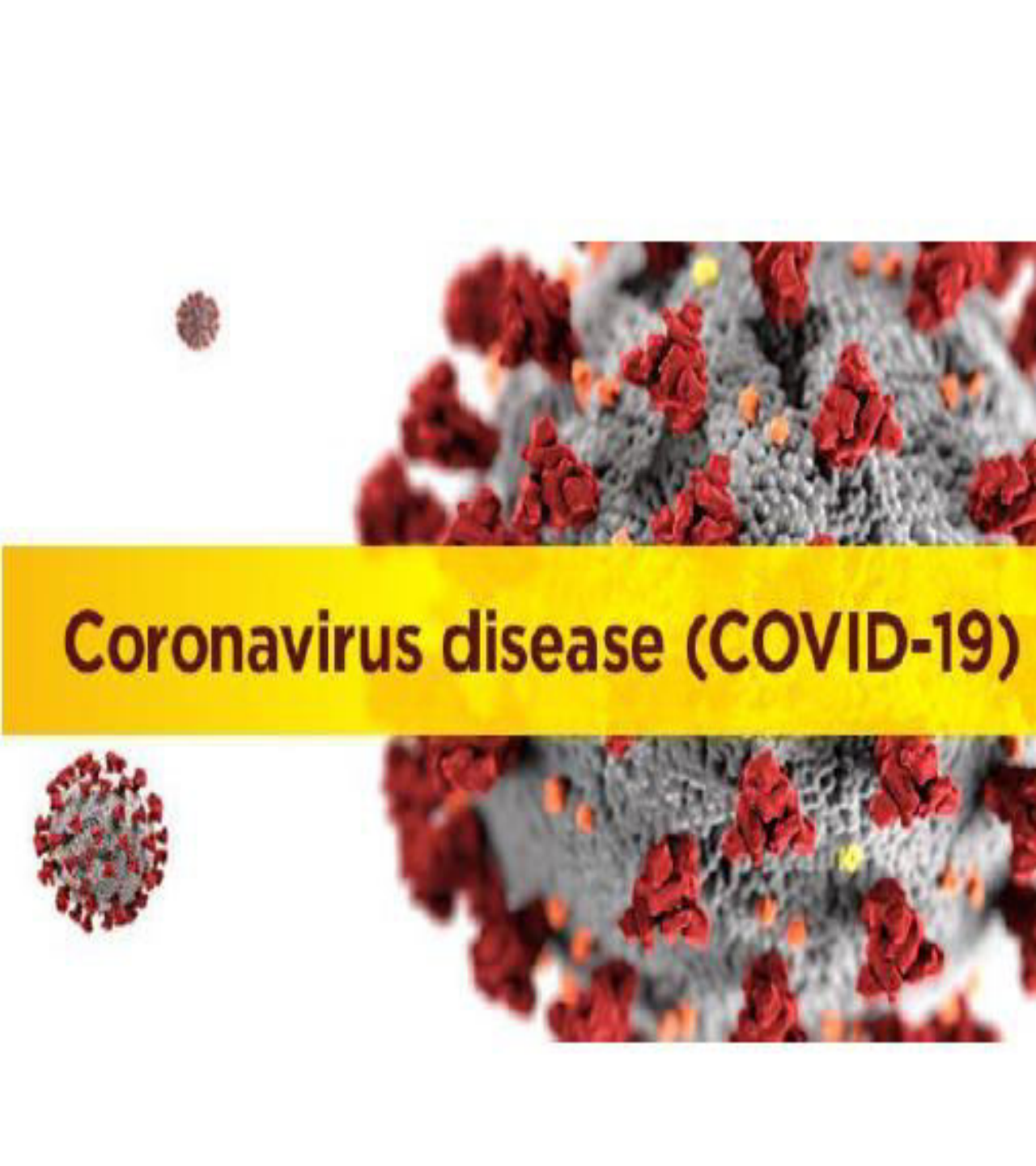
- Suspended classes
- Move to remote online learning on short notice
- No proper wrap up and goodbyes before mandatory closures
- Threatened livelihoods

A microscopic view of a coronavirus particle, showing its characteristic spherical shape with a textured surface of red and orange spikes. A yellow banner is overlaid across the center of the image, containing the text "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)".

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

COVID – 19 PANDEMIC

- What to anticipate when students and instructors gather, masked and distanced, in lecture rooms.
- How about spending two hours in a room with other people, trying to give a lecture or have a conversation. (difficulty hearing someone talk through a mask -- or plexiglass (face shields)–
- What about how tense everyone could get if a student coughs?
- What about all of the other challenges the people on campus would face each day, as they went about their way across campus, worried that they might be exposing themselves to a dangerous virus?
- AND what about the political, social and economic turmoil of the recent months, and the impact to instructors' and students' finances, health, and sense of safety.



KEY QUESTIONS

- How do we teach the Lonely, the Fearful, the Broken, the uncertain , the confused?
- How do we help our students to ease their anxiety when we ourselves are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, and unsure?
- How do we help our students to keep learning?

Trauma-Informed Strategies to Help Students Engage & Learn

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy encompasses all the teaching practices we engage in with a keen awareness of our students' traumatic experiences and their effects on students well-being. We are intentional to promote environments of healing, empowerment, and recovery rather than practices that may hinder and re-traumatize.

– [Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care \(ITTIC\), \(2015\). *What is trauma-informed care?*](#)

TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACHES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

To be trauma-informed in the context of higher education means that you :

- understand the ways in which trauma can impact learners, educators and staff;
- use that understanding to inform educational policies and practices in order to maximise the possibilities for learning;
- make learning accessible and help to re-establish a sense of control, connection and meaning;
- engage in student centred teaching and learning (students' rights and responsibilities are respected and encouraged).

Teaching policies & practices that emphasize a growth mindset



Guiding Principles

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy:

1. Foster emotional, intellectual, physical, and interpersonal **safety**.
2. Build **trustworthiness** and **transparency**.
3. Facilitate **peer support**.
4. Promote **collaboration**.
5. Empower **voice** and **choice**.
6. Pay attention to **cultural, historical, and gender** issues.

– [SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative](#)



1. Foster Emotional, Intellectual, Physical and Interpersonal Safety

- Email your students to remind them that you are still there for them;
- Tell them how you are shifting your schedule to deal with the new situation and that change is part of life. Humanise yourself and make it casual;
- Communicate **often** but **briefly** and invite conversation;
- Let your students know that if they need help, they can reach out to you;
- Let them know about the institutional arrangements for counselling and preliminary mental health care and share the contact details of the responsible persons so that students can reach out if they need to speak to someone, even anonymously;
- Offer “radical hospitality” – “all of the student is welcomed in your space”- of course within boundaries;
- Do not take things personally;

2. Build Trustworthiness and Transparency

- ▶ **Non-traditional readings** are not ground-breaking pedagogy, but moving to online learning environments in the face of a pandemic gives new meaning and relevance to this choice.
- ▶ **Re-emphasize concepts and scaffold.** Stress affects memory, students will need more reminders than usual about when assignments are due, what was previously covered in class, and how it connects to what they are learning next. Build those guideposts into your syllabus, course-management system, and class meetings.
- ▶ **Be organised but flexible.** Set out your course, and your goals, as clearly as possible, so students know where you are headed and how you plan to get there, week by week.
- ▶ **Be considerate with students with challenges.** If students get sick or stressed, they may miss class or turn in work late.
- ▶ Be more explicit in making the connections between assignments and the course objectives, spelling out the steps required to complete each assignment and detailing how it will be evaluated. The latter is mainly by using rubrics as guides for peer assessments which improves the overall learning of the students as they get an idea of what high-quality work looks like.

3. Facilitate Peer Support

- ▶ Facilitate relationship building among your students.
- ▶ Work with one or two other instructors to help devise strategies for your classes.
- ▶ This network will give you both a sounding board for your ideas and a support group to help manage your own stress during **this time**.
- ▶ Use optimistic language, such as, “When you come back to campus next semester, we shall ...”

4. Promote Collaboration and Mutuality

- ▶ Ask students what matters to them, what they want to learn and what interests them;
- ▶ Incorporate their ideas into your communications and instructions;
- ▶ Create an environment that is conducive to collaboration and sharing of power between students and yourself. For example, invite them to create assignments;
- ▶ Involve them in activities that will generate an interest in learning and make the learning environment safe and enjoyable;
- ▶ Give constructive feedback;
- ▶ Try out the Feed Forward Approach and Drive- Comment- Revise- Submit method of formative assessment.

5. Empower voice and choice

- ▶ **Involve students.**
- ▶ During times of trauma, people often feel as if they lack control over their lives.
- ▶ That will probably be true as people return to campus, uncertain of the physical risks they face.
- ▶ Ask students to contribute to the design of the course in meaningful ways.

Scenario One

- ▶ You are hosting a synchronous session for your students on Zoom. Several of your students do not turn on their cameras as required.
- ▶ What could be the recommended trauma-informed response of the instructor?

Scenario Two

- ▶ A student is consistently missing course deadlines and has alluded to personal challenges.
- ▶ What could be the Instructor's recommended trauma-informed response?



Thank you for listening!

Any questions are welcome!