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Compounded Trauma and the Teaching Librarian:

Reflections on Trauma-Informed Approaches and the Practice of Radical Empathy

Sheila García Mazari and Maya Hobscheid

Within transformative learning theory, as theorized by its founder Jack Mezirow, the transformation of perspective is triggered by a disorienting dilemma. This disorienting dilemma leads toward a phase of self-examination whereby the individual attempts to make sense of the dilemma; the individual then builds new behavior that addresses the impact of the dilemma on their perceived sense of reality.[1] As two early-career, tenure-track librarians, our disorienting dilemma was and continues to be two-fold: a worldwide pandemic and continued violence toward BIPOC communities, both often characterized as "collective traumas." In this chapter, we outline the context in which we undertook self-examination to understand the impact of the dual disorienting dilemmas not only on ourselves but also on the students we work with. Finally, we will delve into how we have integrated our learning toward building new behavior, more specifically, by intentionally integrating trauma-informed approaches to build an increasingly inclusive instructional experience.

DISORIENTING DILEMMAS AND CATALYSTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Perhaps it would be of no surprise that one of the disorienting dilemmas we have experienced has been the ongoing (as of fall 2021) COVID-19 pandemic. Based on Kaisu Mälkki's work regarding emotions and transformative learning, such a large-scale societal shift in how individuals have engaged with the world would categorize the disorienting dilemma of the COVID-19 pandemic as a chaotic experience.[2] A chaotic experience is defined as the space in which one is "in a vacuum of meanings: figuratively speaking, there are no ready-made labels or concepts to give meaning to one's experiences."[3] The first stay-at-home order for the state of Michigan began on March 24, 2020.[4] The impact on the act of active teaching was immediate, with instruction moving to an online and primarily asynchronous model. The scale and speed at which this occurred caused professors, students, and librarians alike to scramble in delivering and consuming information and in reconceptualizing active learning models toward an online asynchronous approach. While some disciplines had delivered content online before, many had not done so, creating a vacuum of understanding regarding not only what was effective teaching but also what was effective learning.

As stay-at-home orders were extended due to a continual rise of COVID-19 cases, the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, marked another increase in the visibility of police violence, particularly against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and compounded the inequitable impact that COVID-19 has had on these communities.[5] In parallel with both COVID-19 and a national reckoning with state-sanctioned violence, Anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes continued to grow, eventually leading toward the #StopAAPIHate movement in an attempt to address these gross acts of discrimination and violence.[6] Both COVID-19 and ongoing acts of racism created dual disorienting dilemmas, a state of chaos that served as a catalyst for us to examine our positionality as not only teaching librarians but also as members of historically excluded communities ourselves.

Impact of COVID-19

While we both participated in the same training opportunities and were deeply impacted by the change to an online environment, our experiences were still vastly different. For Maya, instruction for the semester was mostly completed; while she was more familiar with online content creation, this knowledge meant that she also became a source of information and a trainer for dozens of faculty as they navigated the move to online instruction as well. For Sheila, the move to online instruction represented a disorienting dilemma within a disorienting dilemma as she had been actively teaching in the classroom for only two months. While she was still learning a new job, the impact of COVID-19 led her to have to navigate this learning journey alone, with no pre-established structure for an online presence. As a result, we both had to question our approach to the virtual classroom, particularly as we, as well as the students we work with, each navigated a chaotic experience with a new deadly virus and continually changing safety measures.

Impact of Racism

COVID-19 was introduced into a world that had several pre-existing inequities, such as class, gender, sexuality, and race, among others. There were several events that shaped the first year of the pandemic toward further exacerbating these inequities that gained greater national attention and visibility as people of color, in particular, were disproportionately affected by COVID-19.[7] The subsequent worldwide protests following the killing of George Floyd and the rise in anti-Asian sentiment, in addition to a tense presidential election year, created a charged environment of not only overt racism but also an increased visibility of the structural racism within our institutions. Continued racist acts were met with calls for increased education and anti-racist action, creating a second disorienting dilemma as BIPOC communities had to witness displays of violence on the twenty-four-hour news cycle and social media while continuing to navigate the effects of a worldwide pandemic.

As these dual disorienting dilemmas continue to impact day-to-day operations, our institution adopted an approach of "good enough is enough." These shifting standards of baseline performance were meant to alleviate the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on pre-tenure faculty. For us as teaching librarians, it also highlighted the need to not only speak to collective traumas and disorienting dilemmas but to also acknowledge the impact of compounded trauma on students and local communities, in particular noting how learning can be affected during a chaotic experience. To begin this journey, it was vital to first reflect on the impact these disorienting dilemmas had on us as individuals, as members of historically excluded communities, and as teaching librarians.

EXAMINING, EXPLORING, AND REFLECTING

Reflection is a key component of transformative learning, particularly during chaotic life experiences. While Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has largely focused on the cognitive aspects of making meaning of a disorienting dilemma, scholars such as Kaisu Mälkki and John Dirkx have focused on the emotional aspects of learning.[8] Mälkki's study with women living through the chaotic experience of involuntary childlessness found that reflection "appeared to enable meaning making in a chaotic situation not understandable from within existing meaning frameworks."[9] Mälkki further notes that disorienting dilemmas are inherently emotional and that reflection allows individuals to reconcile the emotional and meaning-making (cognitive) aspects of transformative learning.[10] For us, the opportunity to reflect with intentionality presented itself in the form of institutionally supported learning circles.

The Grand Valley State University Libraries started an initiative in 2019 to provide learning circles as in-house professional development for its employees. The initiative grew out of interest in more accessible and affordable professional development opportunities in the wake of budget cuts. The libraries' learning circles also offered a more equitable option for all employment classes, in contrast to those offered by the Faculty Teaching and Learning Center (FTLC) on campus. All library employees are welcome to submit topic ideas, which are then sent out in a Google Form through which interested employees rank their

first and second choices. In the summer of 2020, one of the offered learning circles was "Trauma-Informed Approaches to Library Services." The topic was so popular that there were enough participants to form two groups, with about six participants in each. There was no set outcome for the learning circle beyond exploring ways to integrate trauma-informed approaches and pedagogies into teaching and library services. The groups met about eight times over the summer, and in order to create cohesion, they shared a Google Doc of resources. This document of resources is available as an appendix to this chapter.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

The learning circle explored a variety of trauma-informed approaches, which included intersectional trauma, compounded trauma, collective trauma, and cultural betrayal trauma theory. A brief explanation of these approaches is provided herein.

Intersectional Trauma

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and it explains how an individual's social and cultural identities can overlap to create instances of both discrimination and privilege.[11] Trauma and trauma responses do not occur in a bubble; trauma occurs within an individual's social and cultural contexts and their intersecting identities. Intersectional trauma is the "psychological harm and psychosocial vulnerability produced through the accumulation of cultural, political, economic, and ecologic stressors tied to salient identity markers such as race or ethnicity."[12]

Compounded Trauma

Compounded trauma, or complex trauma, occurs when an individual experiences multiple traumatic events and long-term impacts from those traumatic events.[13] They can disrupt an individual's development and ability to form secure attachments.

Collective Trauma

Collective trauma occurs when a group of people, or a whole society, experience a psychological reaction to a traumatic event.[14] The COVID-19 pandemic and its socioeconomic impacts can be considered a collective trauma.[15]

Cultural Betrayal Trauma Theory

Coined by Jennifer M. Gomez in 2018, cultural betrayal trauma theory describes the intersection of individual experiences and sociocultural contexts, which includes inequality for marginalized groups who have experienced interpersonal trauma. Gomez states that "societal trauma creates the context for interpersonal trauma within minority groups to be uniquely harmful."[16] The consequences of this kind of trauma include PTSD and internalized prejudice.

How Trauma Affects Learning

As an introduction to trauma-informed approaches and pedagogies, our learning circle first watched and discussed webinars presented by Dr. Mays Imad, coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Center at Pima Community College.[17] These webinars shared a baseline understanding of trauma and how trauma affects learning. In the first webinar, we reviewed the impact of trauma on the brain and strategies to mitigate these effects and improve learning. In the second webinar, we learned about how to help students identify trauma and regulate their own learning. Many of the resources gathered by the learning circles listed practical approaches educators can use to be more trauma-informed, such as involving students in shaping class content, not taking things personally, ensuring student safety, and paying attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues.[18]

While most of the resources shared and discussed were not library-specific, our learning circle was able to make transferable and meaningful connections to their own work, including information literacy instruction, research consultations, and public services. Our learning circles also read research that focused more specifically on trauma in academic library settings. For instance, Conley et al. outline the challenges that students who have experienced trauma have with trusting library faculty and staff and share methods to better support these students.[19] Gohr and Nova delineate the correlation between the aftermath of the 2016 election and the declining mental health of marginalized students, arguing that academic libraries have a responsibility to study and enact trauma-informed practices in order to provide students with a sense of safety while engaging with library services.[20]

In figure 10.1, we provide a visualization of how the information from the learning circle impacted our understanding of trauma, the relationships between different types of trauma, and how they build on and compound each other, particularly for individuals with several historically excluded intersectional identities.
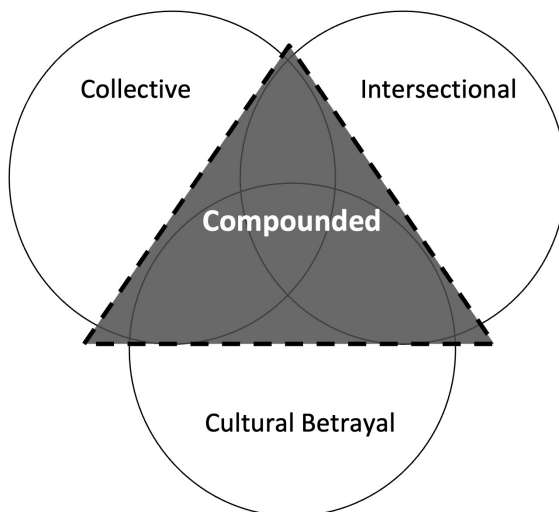
While intersectional trauma can also encompass Cultural Betrayal Trauma Theory, we chose to highlight this specific theory separately as it explains the unique situations that BIPOC individuals in particular can experience when negotiating their trauma within culturally specific expectations and contexts. We have both reflected on what we learned in our learning circle toward making meaning of our experiences, adapting our own work and teaching approaches, and using the model shown in figure 10.1 to guide how we

FIGURE 10.1. Visualization of compounded trauma.

integrate trauma-informed learning. Specific examples of these approaches are provided in the following section.

BUILDING SKILLS AND CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE

While the learning circle process does not require a specific outcome, we integrated our new knowledge into creating more intentional trauma-informed approaches to teaching. In line with transformative learning theory, which posits that "one does not only see through the revised perspective, but lives through it," this intentional integration was applied not only to information literacy instruction but also transformed our identities as teaching librarians.[21] The following narratives outline how we have lived our revised perspectives and sought new pathways of understanding toward sustained and positive change.

Experiences in Building Skills and Constructing Knowledge: Sheila García Mazari

Participating in the learning circle process not only answered several questions regarding how our bodies process trauma but also led me to question my approach and the approaches of my institution at large. As the learning circle was ongoing, I facilitated a library-wide discussion on trauma-informed approaches and accessibility in libraries. I asked participants to read the article, "Supporting Students with Histories of Trauma in Libraries: A Collaboration of Accessibility and Library Services," by Sasha Conley, Aaron Ferguson, and Alana Kumbier.[22] The article presented a case study of a learning commons that led to the development of six strategies to build trauma-aware libraries. These methods include:

1. Acting with awareness of marginalized identities
2. Disrupting negative self-talk
3. Offering self-service resources
4. Offering identity programming
5. Striving for diverse hiring
6. Having a referral approach[23]

The library-wide discussion I facilitated allowed my colleagues to reflect on how the library was already engaging with these methods as well as opportunities to improve the integration of these strategies in workflows and classroom instruction.

Additionally, I worked with a small working group of library faculty to create a COVID-19 impact memo for use in contract renewal and tenure portfolios. This statement was written using both an equity lens and a trauma-informed approach. The memo was recently approved and details the overarching effects of COVID as a collective trauma and its varied impacts on workload and ability to carry out core functions. As such, the memo states that faculty should keep these impacts front of mind when reviewing portfolios of individuals who were impacted in varied ways due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This memo also set the stage for my work on a panel for the 2021 Michigan Academic Library Conference entitled, "Through an Inequitable Collective Trauma Lens: Elevating

narratives on Mental Health and COVID-19."[24] This panel created a space for attendees to not only hear from panelists but also contribute their own experiences and lessons learned as well as speak to how this trauma has transformed their approaches to library work.

As I continue to learn and reflect, I have realized that my action-oriented approach to my work can, at times, sacrifice the pause needed to understand differing perspectives, recognize past traumas, and build empathy for others. This approach is partly due to a need to prove value on my part; engaging in the learning circle has led to the realization that my trauma response is always founded from a space of compounded trauma, whereby I attempt to negotiate intersectional trauma within culturally specific contexts. To do more rather than to rest and do less is my trauma response precisely because I am attempting to reconcile cultural contexts and trauma that can build on each other rather than provide relief. As a result of this new understanding of the ways I process trauma, I am continually negotiating my workload to construct sustainable practices, building in time for reflection in order to make meaning of the contexts in which I am working. For example, during research consultations, I am able to provide space to acknowledge the frustrations students may face with the research process; however, in pursuit of being helpful, I may not acknowledge the ongoing intersectional trauma BIPOC students in particular may face simply from being in academia, an institution that was created to intentionally exclude us. By allowing space to pause and reflect, I value both the external knowledge I present through databases and online searches and the inner knowledge that students bring to every interaction we have. This transformation to my teaching practice is ongoing, and I continue to educate myself on varied approaches that acknowledge my positionality as an instructor as well as that of the daily intersectional struggles that students face throughout their college experience.

Experiences in Building Skills and Constructing Knowledge: Maya Hobscheid

I have taken a trauma-informed approach to my work by building in a more empathetic process. I now intentionally give myself space and time to process and reflect, instead of internalizing problems. I use this approach to my planning and implementing my instruction as well. For example, I had begun to use a social contract in my classes prior to the pandemic in order to bring transparency to how we interact together in an instructional space. I decided to continue this practice during the pandemic with a trauma-informed lens. My social contract uses the values of transparency, respect, inquiry, engagement, reciprocity, and authenticity. I ask everyone to both feel free to speak up and to listen, to bring their whole selves to the class whatever that looks like in the moment, to take care of their comfort needs first, and to speak intentionally. I also promise students that I will be open and transparent with them, provide multiple ways to engage in the class, and to acknowledge their expertise. I then ask if anyone has concerns with the social contract or would like to add anything. I have found the social contract is particularly useful in online classes where it is harder to gauge reactions through body language. It is also a way for me and the students to pause and reflect on the community we are creating together however briefly.

As part of the Virtual Knowledge Market Team, the online version of the GVSU Libraries' peer consultation service, I identified an opportunity to connect peer consultants with trauma-informed approaches. The peer consultants are often the first contact students have with the libraries and it is important that they build trust and rapport with their clients, a task that becomes even more challenging in a virtual environment. In collaboration with several fellow learning circle participants (Samantha Minnis, Emily Frigo, and Alex Smith), I developed and led a training on using a trauma-informed approach in Knowledge Market consultations for the fall 2020 orientation.

My interest in how trauma-informed approaches and pedagogy can be applied to service interactions led to a collaboration with Meredith Knoff, the Learning Commons Librarian at Indiana University Bloomington. We explored the intersections of the integration of cultural competency into reference and research service policies and the implementation of inclusive pedagogies to enact these policies. We focused specifically on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and trauma-informed pedagogies, and we published our research in a paper entitled, "Enacting Service Policy Through Pedagogy to Create a More Inclusive Student Experience."[25]

Through doing this work, I am slowly learning to acknowledge the nuance of my own trauma and lived experiences. As a BIPOC librarian at a predominantly white institution, I have small trauma responses almost every day. Participating in the learning circle helped me interrogate and process my own compounded trauma, in addition to my community's trauma, and how that trauma overlaps with my intersectional trauma. I have found that being able to identify different traumas through the lens of these theories has better helped me understand how they affect my interactions with my students and my colleagues.

TAKING TRANSFORMATION FORWARD

While we have both engaged in integrating trauma-informed approaches and recognizing the effects of compounded trauma in our daily workflows, it is important to note that transformative learning is not a process with an endpoint; rather, it is an interactive process through which worldviews are continually changing in response to shifting circumstances and an ongoing reflective practice.[26] In this section, we outline how we plan to continue to build on the lessons learned from our initial attempts to integrate trauma-informed approaches in our work, with the intent of building a sustainable practice in the classroom and for ourselves as individuals.

Taking Transformation Forward: Sheila García Mazari

As we have transitioned to working back on campus, it can seem that the daily workday is going back to "normal." However, we all continue to navigate the effects of the collective trauma that is COVID-19 as well as continuing to grapple with racism on both individual and systemic levels. The lifting of quarantines or mask mandates does not mean that these very real fears and potential losses in our lives are not still there. Compounded trauma acknowledges that these past traumas impact our daily lives in different ways and, as the

college experience can also be a trauma in of itself for several, it is important to be aware that we will continue to see the effects of these traumas for many years to come.

One of the practices that I began during the summer of 2021 and that I hope to continue is to provide integrated support for students by setting aside time for co-working. Similar to office hours, students will be able to enter a Zoom room and meet with me to ask questions, or they can choose to focus on a research project that they must complete. I provide some jazz tunes in the background so that there is not complete silence and students can choose to turn on their cameras or keep them off during this time. During the summer of 2021, I met two graduate students who were struggling to complete their assignments, particularly in the online/hybrid format. As one of my liaison areas plans to continue to offer various courses online, I believe that this approach will help provide students with additional support as it acknowledges that online learning is not suitable for all.

Additionally, I plan to continue to build in time to pause and reflect. During busy semesters, I can quickly fall into a rhythm of simply moving from one item to another in order to get things done, which is an unsustainable working model, particularly acknowledging the continued trauma that I and my colleagues have encountered. I have built in an intentional practice of reflection and hold myself accountable by checking in with colleagues (such as my co-author Maya) periodically. In support of this goal, I have also begun to delve deeper into my learning of inclusive pedagogies. I currently serve as the secretary of the Association of College and Research Libraries' Inclusive Pedagogy Committee and have continued to unlearn and relearn varied approaches to create a more trauma-informed library experience for students, colleagues, and for myself as well.

Taking Transformation Forward: Maya Hobscheid

As I reflect on my disorienting dilemma and continue to integrate trauma theory into how I teach and work, the phrase that often comes to mind is "waiting for the other shoe to fall." With each new connection and moment of understanding, I am more convinced that I have not had my big "ah-ha moment." I am aware that instead of one grand moment of perfect clarity, my journey will be full of stops and starts, looming doubt and impostor syndrome, and tiny, hard-won victories that feel too insignificant to celebrate.

I did not teach in person at all during the 2020–2021 academic year and taught only a few synchronous online instruction sessions. I am both excited and apprehensive about teaching in person again. In particular, I look forward to applying what I have learned about trauma-informed teaching to classroom instruction. I want to both be generous to my students and their trauma as well as acknowledge my own trauma responses as I relearn how to teach in a physical space again.

In addition to my individual teaching practices, I want to further explore how to integrate trauma theory and approaches in programmatic ways. I think there are opportunities to consider how to be trauma-informed in all aspects of a library instruction program. I plan to further research ways to accomplish this goal in assessing student learning, developing instructional materials, and identifying point-of-need supports. I am also interested in continuing the dialogue and community that the learning circle precipitated in a more

sustained format. I want to create space for teaching librarians to learn, process, and reflect on trauma theory together and to collaboratively build new practices.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IDENTITIES

Engaging in a new approach or rethinking workflows can seem like a daunting task. In this list, we provide probing questions to allow you, the reader, to critically reflect on your own positionality and instructional approach in support of helping you reconcile the emotional and cognitive aspects of transformative learning, toward shaping a renewed instructional identity.

- How can I build intentional reflection into my workflow?
  - When encountering any new knowledge, particularly in response to a chaotic disorienting dilemma, it is important to understand your positionality as well as any prior experience or traumas that may impact your engagement with a trauma-informed approach.
- Can I identify opportunities for integrating inclusive pedagogies such as trauma-informed approaches?
  - Remember that change can be small and incremental. Daily practices and small-scale change often help inform a large-scale shift toward more inclusive pedagogical approaches.
- Trauma can be intersectional and compound on one another. How can I ensure I am engaging in a whole-person approach?
  - With the COVID-19 pandemic, we often focus on the effects this collective trauma has had on students and communities as a whole. However, individuals who are members of historically excluded populations, such as BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, first-generation students, etc., continue to encounter harm. By only focusing on COVID, we can compound this harm further, so it is vital to ensure a whole-person approach is front of mind.
- How can I build trust?
  - To engage in a trauma-informed approach, you must build trust with your community. How can you expand your bubble outside of traditional librarian duties? How can you collaborate with other services on campus?
- How can I apply the tenets of trauma-informed pedagogy through a systems-level approach?
  - Perhaps you want to set up your own learning circle! Or perhaps a different approach may help integrate trauma-informed approaches into your teaching and your daily work. With this work, it is also important to be prepared to step back and reevaluate to ensure that you are not unintentionally causing harm to either your campus community or yourself.

Appendix A. University Libraries Learning Circles Framework

DEFINITION OF LEARNING CIRCLES

A learning circle is an interactive, participatory structure to build, share, and express knowledge through a process of open dialogue around issues or questions with a focus on a shared outcome. The circles will provide a professional learning development opportunity for the group with topics relevant to libraries and/or higher education. All members of the circle are equal participants and will follow the rules of engagement created together by the circle.

STEPS TO START A LEARNING CIRCLE

- Determine a learning topic and materials needed.
- Define timeline, learning goals, and steps to achieve goals.
- Discuss topic, timeline, and goals with direct supervisor.
- Determine location(s) or if hosting circle virtually using Skype for Business or other conference sharing software.
- Invite participants (between four and ten people).
- Assign a facilitator (during first learning circle meeting—does not need to be an expert on topic).
- Establish circle/group norms and rules of engagement.

EXPECTATIONS OF CIRCLE MEMBERS

Each circle member is expected to do any preparatory work set out by the learning circle prior to group meetings and will prioritize attendance as circumstances allow. At the meeting, it is expected that each member will be present in the discussion and actively participate and follow the group norms decided. Learning circles are an opportunity for development, and conversations may require some vulnerability—participants should lean into discomfort, communicate with respect and empathy, and feel encouraged to learn throughout the process.

GROUP NORMS

Each circle will start with the group meetings norms agreed generated by the University Libraries and will customize them to fit the particular needs of their group. The starting list of norms includes: Everyone's wisdom is needed for the wisest results. The past is not the future.

Hear and be heard. Questions are just questions. Be present. Respect and empathy. Make the implicit explicit. Words matter.

CLOSING A CIRCLE

Circles may be closed because either the groups have met their learning goals or because participation has dwindled and a new learning circle configuration is needed. A check-in with direct supervisors should happen at least every six months to ensure the learning circle remains productive. An output is not required; however, if you wish to share please post in LINK on the "Cross-Collaboration" tab.

Appendix B. Trauma-Informed Library Services Learning Circle Resource List

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