

## The Role of Safety in Trauma-Informed Practice

by Anne Smith

*Safety is a profound way of showing respect for the learner.*

- Jane Vella

Trauma-informed practices are all the rage across disciplines as we learn more about [trauma](#) and how it impacts so many of us. Even while traveling on an airline recently (hardly the bastion of trauma-informed approaches), the Captain came on the loudspeaker to tell passengers there was turbulence ahead. He then stated, "while it may be uncomfortable, it will not be unsafe." Knowing what to expect and that there was nothing to fear not only helped put passengers at ease when the bumps inevitably came along, it prevented me from ending up with a cup of hot coffee in my lap.

Had the Captain had some trauma training? Possibly. Either way, I appreciated the heads up!



On a beautiful Vermont morning at the beginning of my journey to becoming a Dialogue Education (DE) practitioner and teacher, I learned about the six core principles of dialogue: inclusion, respect, relevance, engagement, immediacy, and safety. Right away I connected to the concepts of safety and respect as these are core to my work as a facilitator in the movement to end domestic and sexual violence. Our learning events already aimed to be as [trauma-informed](#) as possible. We did this by preparing participants when content contains descriptions of violence, letting them know they can take a break at any time for any reason, and even providing ample healthy snacks and beverages. "Phew! So much to learn. At least I've got that one down," I thought.

Over time as I began to incorporate what I learned at various DE trainings into my practice I realized how aligned these principles and practices are with trauma-informed approaches. If you look at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's, [6 key principles of a trauma-informed approach](#), the parallels are numerous. I discovered we could be doing much more in our training design to create trauma-informed spaces.

Why do we need to go to such great lengths just to make people "feel good"? Aren't we just soothing egos and catering to sensitivities? Hardly. *Fear inhibits learning.*

Below are four things I have learned to keep in mind to ensure enough safety is present to foster learning:

1. **Ensure everyone feels “safe enough.”** We know from the research of [James Zull](#) and [Barbara Fredrickson](#) that positive emotions are far more effective in helping us learn. When the fear centers in the brain are triggered, we are not in the learning part of the brain. In DE, we talk about the difference between being “safe” and “safe enough.” Being trauma-informed in adult education isn’t about being so safe and comfortable that you don’t have authentic and meaningful dialogue. It’s about feeling safe enough *to actually engage in challenging discourse in the first place.*
2. **Create a safe learning environment.** When working with people who have experienced trauma (which [is just about everyone](#), even though impacts and experiences will vary greatly) facilitators can think even more deeply about ways in which they can support learners to feel at ease. Creating learning environments in which you are engaging the [6 Core DE Principles in Action](#) are just a few examples of how you might create a learning environment that is safe and respectful. Designing learning events using DE practices like transparency, which is also a principle of trauma-informed practice, helps to create trust and safety. It can be done in many ways including naming learning objectives and providing a training outline so that the learner knows just what they can expect. In addition, being transparent about what can’t change in your design in service of learning (perhaps the length of the day, or location) is equally important and respectful. Knowing what is expected and where boundaries lie helps a person who has experienced trauma to manage their own needs and responses effectively.
3. **Offer choice.** One-way inclusion can be achieved is through providing *choice* to learners wherever it serves the learning. This can be as simple as providing three questions to consider and letting them decide which two they will answer or letting learners decide where to sit. For example, if you have ever worked with people who have experienced trauma such as victims of sexual assault or first responders, you may have learned many prefer to face the door.
4. **Make the beginning count.** If meaningful dialogue and learning from that dialogue is our goal, then it is critical to ensure a positive and safe space from the beginning of your training to the end that respects the learner and their needs. The first minutes of your time with a group will set the tone to the end.

All we do as facilitators should be in service of the learning. If we can make shifts, big and small, that allow learners to feel safe enough to focus on grappling with content then need and to engage in dialogue, we will have achieved this. Much like the airline passengers, learners will know they might experience some discomfort as they learn and grow, but they won’t feel unsafe. Will they know you know a bit about trauma-informed approaches? Possibly. Either way, they’ll appreciate the heads up!

### **What do you do to help ensure safety in your learning events?**

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