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TEACHING WITH ARCHIVAL MATERIALS USING A TRAUMA-INFORMED FRAMEWORK

Abstract

Working through selecting materials for a syllabus, problematic issues arise in both processed and unprocessed materials. There is a professional urgency in including a trauma-informed framework in instruction and ensuring that people working and viewing collections have the necessary context, preparation, and tools to interpret archival material and manage traumatic responses. Teaching with primary sources requires a knowledge of educational and archival pedagogy. The following paper is a self-reflective exploration into previous work setting a foundation for the models and frameworks still vital in my current role.

Introduction

This article centers around trauma-informed pedagogy as it relates to higher education instruction with archival materials. SAMHSA defines trauma as "result[ing] from 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." (SAMHSA 2016, 7). The Trauma-Informed Framework (TIF) adapts SAMHSA principles of *Safety, Trustworthiness, Peer Support, Collaboration, Empowerment, and Cultural, Historical, and Gender*,[1] to create a guiding structure to mitigate harm in the learning environment (SAMHSA 2016, 10). The *Framework for Visual Literacy for Higher Education* (VLF) establishes a series of *Knowledge Practices* and *Dispositions* to facilitate visual literacy.[2] Using a trauma-informed framework is essential to minimizing harmful traumatic responses from viewing and working with potentially traumatic content (SAMHSA 2016). Used in tandem with the VLF, the TIF recognizes different ways in which content may evoke a traumatic response and establishes principles of action that mitigate the occurrence of a traumatic response and/or intervene to address a response.[3]

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[1] Abbreviated to Cultural for this paper.

[2] The Visual Literacy Framework (VLF) supplies different strategies for viewing, interpreting, evaluating, and creating with visuals, under a wide umbrella of DEIA and social justice initiatives, https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Framework_Companion_Visual_Literacy.pdf

[3] See Follen (2024) for more information on how to integrate visual literacy with the TIF.

Increasingly, archivists take a proactive role in identifying and responding to trauma when selecting primary materials and providing instruction. Learning assessments have revealed difficulties in cognitive behavior in young people with psychological diagnosis of trauma (Perfect, Turley, Calson, Yohannan, and Gilles 2016). Types of traumas can range from interpersonal, historical, and socio-cultural events experienced by an individual (Maynard et al., 2019). Diverse ways of experiencing trauma are not the same, but we can learn from the similarities and draw students to learning objectives and developing skills like critical thinking. Implementing trauma-specific care in education is becoming an emerging expectation in universities, even as we are still working through understanding how to apply this. The importance of supportive leadership, administration, and policies at one's institution can go a long way and is necessary for implementing such programs in the classroom (Collier 2022, 52).

Student engagement is an important consideration in university teaching and involves creating and maintaining an environment that supports student engagement and nurtures a safe space for learning and self-reflection (Schlak 2018, 139). One noteworthy point to make is the element of risk in education and weighing the benefits of a learning moment with some potential risk such as risking exposing people to a traumatic response to show a lesson. In a study of student response, some preliminary work has been shown to indicate that the need to expose students and teach aspects of traumatic events, related to colonization, white supremacy, and racist/homophobic violence is great enough to show the content itself rather than skip it or merely talk about history without presenting visual and material culture with potentially triggering content (Harrison et al 2023, 189). Another study shows that the serendipity of getting lost in the archive or finding oneself may have negative consequences. In this study, 17% of student respondents expressed an emotional response that the researchers categorized as a "Stumbling" moment in the archive (Ezell 2021, 5).

In this article, I present a case study demonstrating the trauma-informed framework within archival curation and instruction. As I worked though selecting primary materials for a syllabus, problematic issues arose in both processed and unprocessed materials. I found examples of traumatic images and content in the collections, as well as harmful past practices in archival description without the proper context around LGBTQIA+ history and representation. This process raised a professional urgency[4] including a trauma-informed framework in instruction and ensuring that people viewing collections are given the necessary context, preparation, and tools to interpret archival material and manage traumatic responses. I hope to offer some ways past

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[4] Though beyond the scope of this article, see recent faculty fires across the United States for culturally insensitive content shown in class, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/10/opinion/letters/hamline-university-muhammad-painting.html

experiences in curating materials for a course in a single lesson, can be applied to teaching a semester-long course[5] using archival principles, materials, and factoring in the framework and TIF as a pedagogical foundation.

Background

As a graduate student in library science working as an Archival Assistant at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC), I was asked to collaborate with a team to choose a syllabus and curate a collection of materials to teach a class. For this assignment, I worked closely with two other graduate students. We had approximately eight weeks to prepare by researching the HRC collections, finding a syllabus, requesting permission from the instructor to adapt the syllabus[6] by creating an assignment, requesting access to the materials, and viewing and evaluating the material for inclusion in the course. Our group had some questions about beginning the process. What are we interested in teaching? What is in the archives and why do we think it is important? What gaps do we see? How are we presenting the information? How can we do so in an ethical way?

We landed on several categories: materials from queer writers, ephemera, materials that allude to the greater political and social context (specifically the Stonewall Riots, HIV/AIDS epidemic, and ballroom culture, as noted in the syllabus).[7] I pulled from four different collections, showing a range of journalistic photography in political activism, queer intimacy, and drag performances. The inclusion of the other two collections opened a window into queer writers at the time and coding they would use to get their depictions of romantic/and or sexual relationships past publishers and to show the social climate they lived in and the potential challenges socially, personally, and professionally.

The assignment was a great opportunity to select material that was hidden away in boxes and not as easily accessible, potentially not yet described in much detail or findable to the public on a database or finding aid. Due to the material not being fully cataloged, I made decisions on how to reference and describe some of the material. In some cases, material was labeled with outdated language on the containers which, if viewed, can cause harm as they are not how individuals and groups currently refer to themselves (Tai 2021, 2-3). I focused on striking a balance between respecting the individuals and themes depicted in the material with current, inclusive language, and acknowledging cultural and collecting history which results at times with traumatic imagery

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[5] Not to be confused with teaching the concepts and application of TIF principles for archival workers. See Laurent and Wright (2020) for more information.

[6] The course used "Readings, discussions, and assignments [to] situate contemporary queer literature and theory in historical context, emphasizing the role of important cultural movements and events (including the Stonewall Riots, the AIDS epidemic, lesbian feminism, and queer drag and ballroom culture) in shaping modern queer and LGBT+ identities."

[7] Teaching the class now would be an opportunity to connect to current sweeping legislation in the United States opposing DEI measures in schools, see https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2025-01-14/lawsuit-by-college-professors-and-students-challenges-alabamas-anti-dei-law

or content. The overall goal of the class was to show connections between creative works and historical events and within identity and social movements, including the Stonewall Riots, and important contributions of queer culture.

On the day of the class, we invited students to look at the material as we lectured, and then they could go around at their own pace. The large tables in the room were arranged in a large circle, so that students could walk around and view the archival items on display. Students could look at the material at their own pace as we lectured. Questions were invited as they arose, helping to create a natural flow of student input and inquiry. The resulting class focused on how differences in archival content and formats can influence historical interpretations in discussing areas of gender queerness, representation, and commodification.

Teaching Integration

Peter Carini's work sets the stage for archivists moving into embracing the unique functional strengths of their discipline over traditional bibliographic instruction and traces the history of archives in education from the early 20th century Europe to governmental efforts in the United States through federal agencies such as the National Archives and Records Administration (Carini 2009, 41-2). In his discussion on teaching to areas outside of an institution's collecting policies, he shows the importance of being cross-disciplinary and making connections between current events and the students' own interests and particular starting point (44). The TIF integration asks us to go further into asking why things are in the archive and how we will describe them. It forces us to confront things in the archive and ourselves and look at how our institutions acquire collections. It points to the violence and historical trauma within archives that can have physiological effects on our body, emotions, and mind.

In 2024 I was asked to teach a graduate course in digital archiving and preservation at a public research university. My first assigned credit-bearing course, I approached revising the syllabus and required readings as an opportunity to integrate the TIF and add readings from diverse perspectives. I took an inventory of some areas that are important to me to include in the course. I wanted the course materials to be as practical and career related as possible. Certain challenges arose during teaching the graduate course, which mirrored aspects of my earlier experience. The graduate course is fully online and on an accelerated timeline of seven month-semester. One variable is time - How to deal with time constraints when asking students to observe, inspect, and critically examine details in a single item, as well as conceptualize the collection as a whole? The students have just seven weeks to have at minimum an introduction to complex digital archiving and preservation models and concepts.

Another challenge was developing connection and collaboration in a digital environment. One of the benefits a fully online program offers students is a large amount of independence and flexibility. In this course format, I don't have the ability to monitor each aspect of the learning

environment, but I do have the option of introducing the TIF and asking the class to adhere to an ethical code of standards.[8] In assigning readings and projects, I was cognizant of their workload and realistic about the time they would allot.

As a guide to help myself work through these challenges, I established a table to reference guiding questions and applied TIF principles (Table 1.). I included Carini's list of archival concepts,[9] with original numbering order maintained, especially useful for me in thinking through what I was asking students to do in close readings of collection material (Carini 2009, 48). I took a broad approach to creating the table. It is informed by my past and present work, and I wanted this to have practical uses in the future. Carini's archival concepts create space for change, adding to the adaptability of foundational learning areas. Exploring the guided questions is a way to enter a new perspective on an established course or in developing a new course.

Table 1. An example of mapping trauma-informed principles with Carini's archival concepts.

TIF Principle	Carini Archival Concept	Guiding Question
Safety	15. The importance of a flexible research process that lends itself to change and deviation when appropriate	● How might the material be traumatizing to the audience? ● What could we do to mitigate or to step in and intervene if we noticed a traumatic response in someone else?
Trustworthiness	13. How to interpret silences in the archives	● Is it ethical to make certain images visible? Were they meant to be seen? How was I an authority on deciding this?

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[9] I made some modifications to the original language, to update the framing towards information and visual literacy.

TIF Principle	Carini Archival Concept	Guiding Question
Peer Support	14. How to interpret evidence surrounding underrepresented groups	● How is the class structured for viewing and discussion?
Collaboration	4. The relationship between the creator and the audience (an image from a personal archive will differ in its intention from a photojournalism image, even if the content is similar)	● Is the subject's (subjects') consent documented? In what context was the image taken?
Empowerment	12. How to identify appropriate materials within a collection	● How do we phrase things that are difficult for us? What words did we choose to use? What categories and labels do we impose? ● How I was feeling during the process and am I uncomfortable with anything?
Cultural	3. Understanding the importance of identifying the context around the groups depicted in the material, as well as considering the viewers when evaluating primary sources	● What are the effects of this work on communities? ● Am I reading something into an image that was not historically accurate? Am I speaking for others, or am I making space for the stories I

TIF Principle	Carini Archival Concept	Guiding Question
	6. The tone of a document, which can reveal things about the creator, their perspective, and goals	encountered in the archive?

Applying Principles

Establishing the TIF principle of safety felt most important to this class. I felt that by incorporating this principle as I prepared the course could establish a strong foundation. In course preparation, I used the guided question to draft a monthly content schedule preemptively designed to mitigate harm. I offered alternatives for each week whenever possible. This gives the student a sense of their own agency and ability to opt-out of anything that feels concerning. Having alternatives available also relieved me of trying to find a suitable replacement on short notice. In an accelerated course, students are often working on overlapping weeks and deadlines come quickly. Having worked to establish safety and replacement assignments when appropriate to the course, I was able to pivot more easily when needed. I had time to adjust or add to resources based on student-feedback.

This led to incorporating another TIF principle, establishing trustworthiness. As students can see their issues addressed quickly to mitigate any further issues, the reciprocity of ideas and input into the course materials establishes a sense of trustworthiness. The inclusion of student voices helped me to see what may be missing. In questioning myself as the authority in selecting and describing material, I opened space for new perspectives. An important part of TIF, the cultural principle can be investigated by exploring different community perspectives. By including students' independence in choosing a specific area of archives to focus on for a project, more community perspectives are brought into the course. The students bring their own backgrounds and professional interests, which help me to fill out gaps in the curriculum. This strengthens the overall trustworthiness of the course, as well as the collaboration and cultural principles.

Peer support and empowerment principles are important considerations regarding the issues in a digital course. The challenge was to craft avenues of discussion and interaction within the online learning management system. The asynchronous format allows students to take the course on their own time. If they finish the course material, they can jump to later modules. Since I do not have the ability to lead and observe discussions as I would in a typical classroom, I included reflective writing exercises each week and at the end of the course. This is meant to give students time and space to check-in with themselves and how they are feeling as the course progresses.

This helped me assess which weekly modules or readings may be bringing up potentially traumatic responses. This awareness gave me the chance to adjust to the course as needed. Using the guiding questions along with the TIF principles is an effective way to plan a course and allows for continuous learning and opportunities for change inherent in all evolving programs.

Conclusion

Teaching with archival materials using a trauma-informed framework improves how we connect and support students by meeting them on many distinct levels of awareness and presence in the classroom. It is important to use the TIF in archival work because it reflects on the occurrence of a trauma-response on the people and communities depicted in the material, and on the people viewing and working with the material. This can help broaden the contextualization and stories we tell and requires a new way of looking at the material, as well as thinking about how we describe and display material.

Archivists are equipped to develop relevant courses, which can expose students to special collections, research, meaning making, thinking critically, visual literacy and evaluating sources. At the time of preparing the class, I did not realize how much work in graduate school would be applicable to the work I do as a professional. In my work as an instructor and archivist, I have repeatedly returned to concepts in this paper. The work of curating material for a single classroom instruction can be used to inform the development of a semester-long course. This highlights the value archivists bring to academic instruction and reflects an interdisciplinary approach. Integrating the TIF can help in meaning-making and a deeper understanding of collections. It challenges us to look deeper into our collections and consider the ethics behind collecting such material, as well as how it is described and displayed. I believe incorporating the principles into a classroom will result in more trust and engagement from students who feel supported.

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