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Trauma-informed considerations for drama in education with adults

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UVA Acts is a new applied theater initiative at the University of Virginia, dedicated to a faculty audience and focusing on issues of equity in the classroom and workplace. In January 2020, UVA Acts began developing a workshop series around gender-inclusive cultures as a part of our work with the Provost’s office. There is an urgent need for addressing gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment among faculty in American higher education, evidenced by national studies (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Shreffler et al.) and personal stories (Anderson). UVA Acts audiences likely include people who have experienced gender-based violence or discrimination as well as people who have perpetrated it. As a result, the dramatic frame and producing practices for this program required a trauma-informed approach or an educational approach that “[infuses] an understanding of the impact of trauma and adverse life experiences [...] and promote[s] a physically and psychologically safe environment to foster student growth” (Pickens and Tschopp 1).

In my experience, drama in education (DiE) programming can have a disproportionate emphasis on dramatic and pedagogical content and a lack of alignment in producing practices. For this program, I considered a trauma-informed approach to content and dramatic frames, but I also carefully considered producing structures around the workshop series itself. I asked, if adults are participating in a drama about harmful cultures in their professional environments, how can participants be generously and safely invited into a rare moment of embodied meaning-making with colleagues? How can embodied participation for adults be trauma-informed, agentive, and action-oriented? This chapter reflects on UVA Acts’ adapted approach to DiE for our Gender Inclusive Culture workshops informed by planning protocols for trauma-informed care from clinical psychologists, Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris.

The need for a trauma-informed approach

For the purposes of this essay and our workshop series, sexual harassment is broadly defined in alignment with definitions from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine’s report, *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*:
Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination that includes gender harassment (verbal and nonverbal behaviors that convey hostility to, objectification of, exclusion of, or second-class status about members of one gender), unwanted sexual attention (verbally or physically unwelcome sexual advances, which can include assault), and sexual coercion (when favorable professional or educational treatment is conditioned on sexual activity).

With these definitions in mind, the prevalence of sexual harassment in academic workplaces has been found to be staggering in the United States. In the multiple studies reviewed for the Sexual Harassment of Women report, researchers found that 42%–58% of academic faculty experienced sexual harassment at work (39–40). As many of these studies did not explicitly include nonbinary or transgender participants, and most did not consider social identities beyond gender, I also pursued research detailing broad patterns around sexual harassment in academic workplaces with an intersectional lens. Based on the evidence found, I knew it was likely that our workshop participants would include several survivors of gender and sexual harassment. Therefore, our DiE workshops had to be trauma-informed, particularly considering that all forms and frequencies of gender and sexual harassment have been shown to have a negative impact on survivors’ emotional well-being at work (National Academies 69). The stress of gender harassment and discrimination is also magnified by the stress of racial discrimination (Clancy et al. 1619), and therefore it was critical for the experiences of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian and Pacific Islander women and nonbinary participants to be prioritized.

For this particular program, the Provost’s Office requested a program that would be available to (and strongly encouraged for) all levels of faculty and graduate students. Considering that many of our workshops are privately facilitated for a department of 15–30 faculty and graduate students, it is statistically likely for a participant to be in an audience with a person who holds power over their experience at work, including department chairs, tenure committee chairs, graduate advisors, or even unreported harassers. Therefore, the program was designed for heterogeneous audiences with a broad range of experiences, identities, and statuses within a hierarchical power structure.

**Stakeholders, participants, and resulting pedagogical decisions**

UVA Acts was started shortly after the 2018 publication of the Sexual Harassment of Women report, and the Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs (VPFA) team designated this content as a top learning priority for our programming. The desire articulated by the VPFA team for this workshop was to give participants space to consider the gender-biased cultures they were currently participating in, to practice interpersonal skills that might lead to more equitable cultures, and finally to imagine systemic and structural changes that would motivate these cultural and interpersonal shifts. I worked with the VPFA team and met with stakeholders from across UVA to ensure that our language and goals were in alignment with, and not repeating, educational programming in other spaces. I did not facilitate focus groups or independent interviews with faculty in creating this workshop series, a departure from my typical, community-based approach, due to my connection with the Provost’s Office and my status as a staff member and fellow colleague. I instead focused my research on national research around the barriers leading to marginalizing environments for women and nonbinary folks, and best practices for improving systems and cultures of faculty workplaces.

In my experience, workshops and presentations in higher education that share these goals often take one of three approaches. The first is a practical, “nuts and bolts” presentation, with
data to demonstrate the problem, best practices from other universities, and data on how those practices work. I have experienced this approach as helpful but overwhelming, and this approach tends to overlook barriers to and divergent experiences in creating systemic change. The second approach is to promote deep reflection and personal awareness around one’s complicity in and/or experiences of oppression, perhaps including an analysis of one’s social locations or proximity to a specific social issue. In my experience, this approach can often lead to further distress for participants who are currently marginalized as a result of their colleagues’ lack of personal awareness. The third approach can aim to “prove” there’s a problem, presenting statistical data, personal testimonies, and case studies that are often chosen for the dramatic emotional arc that may result for participants. I find this approach to be an emotionally and intellectually manipulative approach, furthering the pain of participants who are actively experiencing the issue “proved” by the presenter.

I hoped to avoid these limitations and create a cohesive, in-depth curriculum. Considering research around dosage in interpersonal violence prevention interventions (DeGue et al. 357), I chose to create a series of three two-hour workshops that would avoid embodiment but embrace imagination. Rather than using comparison to other universities, personal reflection, or guilt and shame as motivating factors (as I feel the three approaches mentioned earlier can often do), I wanted participants to derive their motivation from co-created, imagined futures of higher education without sexual harassment. I adhered to a few guiding principles in developing the programmatic goals, informed by an intersectional, trauma-informed, and prevention-focused lens: a focus on addressing and changing cultural norms, an ensemble including diverse racial, gender, and sexual identities, and avoidance of any dramatization of violence or the moments leading up to violence.

The workshop series was designed to allow participants to dialogically build connections between evidence-based data, their personal experiences, and the practices and policies of UVA. They then used those connections to build new ideas about what could happen in the future. As an example, the first workshop of the series began with a Vote from Your Seat exercise (Dawson), including prompts such as “I or someone I know has experienced microaggressions from colleagues due to gender identity.” After each prompt, participants stood or raised their hand to agree. Following each moment for voting, participants analyzed the data they noticed from the exercise, and I (as the facilitator) introduced definitions and statistics connecting to their experiences. We then moved into an adapted Real/Ideal Images exercise (Boal 185); participants used modeling clay and toothpicks to create individual images of gender bias in their respective workplace environments as they were today. Participants shared these images with a partner, and as pairs they dismantled their individual structures to provide building materials for collaboratively built images of what an ideal workplace culture might be. We used this exercise to prompt conversation around different types of situations that occur in an environment such as academia, where sexual harassment is normalized. Participants generated these situations, such as being interrupted constantly by a colleague. Two actors then improvised a short scene where one participant disclosed their experience of sexual harassment to a colleague, using the examples generated by participants. Participants were able to ask the actors questions in role, offer advice, and watch the scene replayed. Finally, they committed (verbally and in writing) to their next actions toward personal growth and systemic change, keeping in mind their co-constructed vision of a gender-inclusive culture.

With this structure, we introduce information around sexual harassment and invite participants to consider their own workplace environments, practice skills (supporting a colleague who discloses), and collaboratively imagine new futures. We avoid embodiment that
might trigger trauma responses in survivors by using modeling clay and replaying scenes with our actors rather than participants in role. Keeping in mind the varying power structures at play, we also avoid disclosure of personal experiences by designing sociometric prompts to say, “I or someone I know,” ensuring we’re discussing cultures and systems, and using fictionalized and common scenarios rather than specific, authentic ones.

A DiE approach allows us to engage in pedagogical, drama-based practices that are refreshing and connective for participants—without employing minimizing jokes, relying on vulnerable storytelling, or emotionally manipulating our audience into an empathetic response. We use tools of storytelling and performance to support emotional and embodied familiarity with unfamiliar skills (such as supporting a colleague who discloses). Embodied dialogue around key data (such as Vote from Your Seat) allows information to be shared in a memorable manner. Finally, building imagery to represent a vision of the future invites participants to, in Maxine Greene’s words, “[…] take the initiative in reaching beyond their own actualities, in looking at things as they could be otherwise” (124).

Trauma-informed producing structures

While I intentionally defined trauma-informed learning objectives and an aligned dramatic frame, I also focused on logistical and spatial structures supporting the workshops. If the workshop content is richly layered and pedagogically sound but the logistical structures are not trauma-informed, survivors of sexual harassment can still have a harmful experience. Fallot and Harris offer a framework for evaluating programming decisions with a trauma-informed lens, centered on five core values of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and environment (2009, 3). Integrating these values into the logistics of a DiE workshop series requires detailed preparation, but this integration can allow faculty participants to engage more fully in embodied learning through a dramatic process. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, our ability to integrate and research these practices has been limited, but I share them here as an invitation to other practitioners and a reflection on Fallot and Harris’s framework in action.

Safety

Fallot and Harris name the key question of safety to be, “To what extent do the program’s activities and settings ensure the physical and emotional safety of [participants]?” (7). The University of Virginia’s physical space was designed and commissioned by Thomas Jefferson, a “founding father” of the United States who bought and sold enslaved people and had a nonconsensual sexual relationship with at least one enslaved person, Sally Hemmings (“The Life of Sally Hemmings”). The historic, original areas of UVA aesthetically memorialize Jefferson, the original students and faculty, and the violence they perpetuated (President’s Commission 25). I therefore work to host our programming in newer buildings, or even off campus in auxiliary spaces, prioritizing gender-neutral restrooms, rooms with natural light and moveable furniture, adjacent areas for participants to take breaks in private, and aesthetics that are modern, clean, and comfortable. Water, tissues, and snacks are at each table. We ensure that participants know they are welcome to take breaks, and we add signs to help participants clearly navigate the space. Finally, we send photos and descriptions of the space where we host the workshop in advance. Participants who aren’t concerned about the aesthetics of the space simply experience an abundance of information; participants who may be anxious about the layout will have their questions answered before needing to ask them.
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is found in clarity, communications, and boundaries, giving participants the opportunity to develop reasonable expectations and see those expectations consistently met. Fallot and Harris offer several questions for reflection, including: “Does the program provide clear information about what will be done, by whom, when, why, under what circumstances, at what cost, with what goals?” (8). These requirements can be difficult to merge with the organic, process-oriented nature of DiE. A trauma-informed lens invites practitioners to prepare participants for everything they will experience, rather than letting the drama unfold for each moment. For our gender-inclusive culture workshops, we send attendees an agenda in advance of the performance, describing activities and summarizing topics in plain language. We include photographs of the actors to demonstrate the diverse representation of identities included. Before the performance begins, we describe each exercise and keep an agenda on the wall for reference, including timing for breaks. If timing or an activity needs to change in response to participants’ work, we acknowledge the change and write it on our agenda. While we don’t provide RSVP lists to participants in advance, I always ask organizing hosts about who will be in the room, so that I can know about any hierarchies of power that might inform participants’ experience of trust and willingness to engage. As a practitioner and artist, I delight in surprises, in adding unexpected elements to the drama. For this content, however, it’s critical to allow participants to know what to expect in advance.

Choice

Choice for participants is a more inherent quality of DiE—participants are making choices about characters, about the next steps in the drama, and so on. As I consider Fallot and Harris’ key question around choice, “How can services be modified to ensure that [participant] experiences of choice and control are maximized?” (8), I also think about the other choices we make explicit throughout our programming: the option to take a break, the option to participate in dialogue or individually reflect, the choices we introduce in order to allow for diverse abilities and bodies, the option to disclose personal information. We aim to provide as much information as possible about the choices that exist and the relevant results of those choices.

The body is central in experiences of gendered trauma, and it is possible that putting one’s body into role, however removed from violence, could result in further trauma for a participant. We create as much choice around embodiment as possible. The workshop series incorporates visual arts exercises, using art supplies rather than participants’ bodies to create meaning. For movement and gesture work, we offer a choice to limit engagement to a single body part, or a vocal expression, rather than the whole body. We also provide participants with the choice to step into a drama or to have a professional actor step into the drama. Our actors are prepared with research on gendered discrimination in the academy, information about the faculty context, and pre-generated characters. The rest—including the setting, character relationships, and actions—is determined by the audience. We use this freedom to responsively create options for participants: they might step into the drama, write individually to a character, interview a character in a small group, brainstorm possible next actions as a whole group, and so forth. This choice perhaps blurs the line between DiE and Theatre in Education (Cooper 46), but I find it critical for our DiE work in a professional environment with possibly traumatized adults.
Collaboration

In their description of the principle “Collaboration,” Fallot and Harris ask, “To what extent do the program’s activities and settings maximize collaboration and sharing of power between staff and [participants]?” (9). Informed by community-based practice (Bouzek 3), UVA Acts holds pilot performances for each program we develop in order to invite participants to witness and engage in the program. During these pilots, I pay special attention to how each participant moves through the exercises. I also solicit explicit feedback from our participants during feedback sessions. As an example, when we piloted these workshops originally, one of our dramatic frames was a game show. While participants enjoyed the way we made fun of the impossible demands put on women in academia, we received feedback that—after the first few minutes of the drama—it felt difficult to laugh at something so painful. Participants could hold some humor in acknowledging and naming the problem but also personally recognized the character’s circumstances. This helped us to reframe this exercise with a different tone and structure.

Empowerment

Fallot and Harris complete their list of participant-centered principles with the notion of empowerment. They ask, “How can services be modified to ensure that experiences of empowerment and the development or enhancement of [participant] skills are maximized?” (10). This final question redirects us to the learning objectives described at the beginning of the essay. With a trauma-informed approach, survivors of gender discrimination and interpersonal violence can learn about the practices of a gender-inclusive environment alongside their colleagues in such a way that is empowering and skill-building. Many skills of gender-inclusive cultures are rarely practiced, even by those who would benefit from them, because they have not been modeled. When we can equip faculty with the statistics around gender discrimination and sexual harassment in combination with evidence-based practices, we can support the empowerment of all faculty participants as they work toward gender-inclusive cultures.

Staff experience

Fallot and Harris go on to outline each of these principles in terms of staff experience, which might translate to ensemble member experience in UVA Acts. While rehearsal structure is not the focus of this reflection, I believe a trauma-informed lens for the rehearsal and performance experience is critical. Just as with our participants, we can never know who may be a survivor of gender-based violence or discrimination. I consider each of these principles when designing a rehearsal process and workshop structure. Ensemble members have the choice to avoid a scene or specific topic; we share our needs and reflections at the beginning and end of rehearsal; we build in breaks; and every ensemble member contributes to the final workshop design. Much has been written on developing collaborative and inclusive rehearsal processes, but more research is needed on trauma-informed direction and devising, particularly around issues of social change.

Trauma considerations as assets for DiE

While there are some necessary compromises when designing trauma-informed DiE experiences for adults in professional spaces—fewer surprises, less artistic control, more boundaries—these practices can also be assets. Transparency in structures and agendas means that
participants start to understand how DiE works, leading attendees to return for multiple workshops because they believe our work to be legitimate. As a facilitator, my own mental well-being is better protected with this approach, even when facilitating several performances and workshops per week. As artists, the ensemble is pushed to develop more innovative dramatic frames, more approaches to role play, more facilitation styles. Most importantly, our participants can engage more fully with the work, the ideas, the story, and their own experiences. These principles allow for innovation through restriction for practitioners, and engagement through trust for participants.

Note
1 Fallot and Harris use the word “consumers” rather than participants. I have replaced the word throughout to maintain clarity.

References


Dawson, Katie. “Vote from Your Seat.” Vote from Your Seat, Drama-Based Instruction, http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/content/vote-your-seat.


