



TEACHING WHILE HOLDING: TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY AS AN UBUNTU-INFORMED PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: *In African and Global South contexts, social work education is situated within lived realities shaped by collective trauma, inequality, and the ongoing work of survival. These realities inevitably enter classroom spaces and influence how students engage with learning, relationships, and authority. Drawing on lived experience as a social work educator, this article reflects on trauma-informed pedagogy as an Ubuntu-informed practice grounded in relational ethics, dignity, and collective responsibility. Ubuntu, as an African philosophical worldview, offers a culturally grounded lens through which trauma-informed teaching can be understood not as an imported or exceptional intervention, but as an ethical orientation aligned with African values of shared humanity and mutual care. The article argues that trauma-informed pedagogy finds coherence and grounding in Ubuntu, positioning teaching as a moral and relational commitment rather than a neutral or technical task. Practice-based strategies are presented to illustrate how teaching while holding is enacted through everyday pedagogical choices. These practices support student well-being without compromising academic standards. Ubuntu-informed, trauma-responsive pedagogy also functions as a site of professional formation, modelling for social work students how care is enacted in practice. The article contributes to African social work education by reframing trauma-informed pedagogy as a culturally grounded, justice-oriented approach that affirms learning as a collective and humanizing process.*

KEYWORDS: Ubuntu, Trauma-informed pedagogy, Social work education, Professional formation, Global South.



INTRODUCTION

Social Work Education in Africa and Global South contexts occurs against a backdrop of cumulative and collective trauma such as poverty, violence, natural disasters, colonial legacies, and gender and racial inequities. These realities, alongside the pressures of everyday survival, do not cease at the threshold of the classroom. In this article, I reflect on teaching not simply as the delivery of social work content but as a fundamental relational practice that requires care and attentiveness to what students may carry with them into the classroom space. To teach while holding in higher education is to recognize that learning takes place within bodies that perhaps have had histories of trauma. It is important to acknowledge that students and educators themselves often arrive with invisible burdens that shape the pedagogical landscape of content, concentration, participation, and engagement. Drawing on my lived experiences as a social work educator, this article reflects Ubuntu as a relational foundation for trauma-informed pedagogy within my teaching philosophy.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA IN EDUCATIONAL SPACES

Trauma-informed pedagogy recognizes that learning is embodiment and shaped by lived experiences; as such, teaching practices must prioritize safety, relationship building alongside the rigour of academic life. It is a justice-oriented practice movement. Trauma has been described as an experience that overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope and disrupts individuals' sense of safety, control, and meaning (Herman, 1997). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) defines individual trauma as resulting 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." There is no universal cause of trauma; it is not defined solely by an event. We must extend the understanding that trauma also occurs through how the nervous system experiences and responds to overwhelming stress. As van der Kolk (2014a) reminds us, trauma is held in the body, often long after the precipitating event has passed. In the Caribbean and larger Global South contexts, trauma is often cumulative, intergenerational, and socially produced, and rooted in structural inequalities as much as individual experiences. Past experiences can quietly shape how individuals engage in learning spaces, even when the connection is not immediately visible or understood.

THE INVISIBLE BACKPACK: HOW TRAUMA SHOWS UP IN THE CLASSROOM

As an educator who attempts to understand what might be making learning unsafe or overwhelming in the classroom, I imagine each student carrying an invisible backpack, a collection of experiences, emotions, and perhaps memories that arrive in the learning space. This backpack may include fear, shame, powerlessness, grief, betrayal, chronic stress from survival, or the object of someone else's rage. These life experiences are not separate, nor can they be separated from academic life. How do these invisible burdens present themselves in classroom learning environments? Carello and Butler (2015a) outline how trauma influences learning and manifests in behaviour within classroom contexts. They identify several ways in



which trauma may manifest, including difficulties with concentration and memory; heightened anxiety around deadlines, examinations, or public speaking; withdrawal or frequent absences; irritability or hypervigilance, challenges with emotional regulation, difficulty working collaboratively or trusting authority; and fear of taking intellectual or interpersonal risks. These responses are often misinterpreted as disengagement, students being indisciplined, not being motivated or simply being rude. Trauma-informed pedagogy creates a lens that allows educators to understand these behaviours as survival responses, not character flaws. Teaching in a trauma-informed way is not exceptional practice but simply good teaching, as it creates conditions where students can engage fully and experience the classroom as a supportive learning space (Nelsen et al., 2022).

UBUNTU AS A RELATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY

Trauma-informed pedagogy and philosophical tradition of Ubuntu both centre relationality, dignity, and ethical responsibility within shared human spaces. Ubuntu has long taught that we should try to understand human well-being as collective and relational rather than individualized. Trauma-informed pedagogy is informed by an understanding that exposure to trauma, whether acute, chronic, or structural, can significantly affect cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and relational engagement within learning environments (SAMHSA, 2014; van der Kolk, 2014b). Trauma-informed approaches shift attention toward the ways in which educational systems, practices, and power relations may either exacerbate distress or foster safety and engagement. In educational contexts, this framework emphasizes principles of safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural and historical awareness (Carello & Butler, 2015b).

Ubuntu provides a culturally grounded theoretical lens through which trauma-informed pedagogy can be understood. Ubuntu is commonly expressed through the maxim “*a person is a person through other persons*,” affirming that human identity and dignity emerge through relationship (Ramose, 2002; Tutu, 1999). Ubuntu is not merely a moral sentiment; it is a comprehensive ethical framework that demands responsibility toward others and prioritizes communal well-being (Letseka, 2012a; Mkhize, 2008a). Harm to one individual reverberates across the collective, and care becomes a shared moral obligation.

Trauma-informed pedagogy and Ubuntu converge around a shared ethical commitment to relational accountability, rejecting deficit-based or punitive approaches to human behaviour and instead emphasize understanding, connection, and responsibility within classroom spaces. In educational spaces, this convergence teaching is a moral and relational practice. Authority remains present within this environment, but it is exercised with attentiveness to power, dignity, and the potential for harm. Trauma-informed pedagogy and Ubuntu resist the tendency to frame trauma as solely individual or clinical; after all, within the Caribbean and African territories, trauma is collective, historical, and structurally rooted in colonial legacies. Ubuntu provides a framework for recognizing these broader realities while affirming education as a site of healing, connection, and ethical responsibility. Teaching informed by Ubuntu principles requires attentiveness not only to individual learners but also to the relational and cultural conditions that shape learning itself. Within this theoretical framing, teaching while holding emerges as an enactment of both trauma-informed pedagogy and Ubuntu ethics. It reflects an



approach to education that prioritizes safety without abandoning rigour, care without erasing boundaries, and relationality without diminishing accountability. This framework offers a culturally grounded foundation for trauma-informed pedagogy in the Global South and supports the positioning of relational teaching practices as legitimate, ethical, and scholarly.

TEACHING WHILE HOLDING

Over my years of teaching, I have come to recognize that my pedagogical approach has been grounded in Ubuntu and trauma-informed strategies. Teaching while holding is enacted through my everyday pedagogical choices rather than large interventions. It also recognizes the emotional labour of educators who themselves navigate institutional pressures while holding space for others. My feedback from student evaluations regularly affirms that students experience my classroom as a space where they feel recognized and supported. In my teaching practice this begins with creating opportunities for brief emotional or reflective check-ins, which allow students to arrive fully in the learning space acknowledging the realities they bring with them. These moments are not therapeutic in nature; rather, they function as grounding practices that affirm students' presence and readiness to learn.

I provide clarity and consistency about intentions surrounding expectations, deadlines, and assessment criteria. This reduces uncertainty and anticipatory anxiety, particularly for students whose previous experiences may have made academic spaces feel unpredictable or punitive. Transparent grading rubrics further support this process by demystifying evaluation and shifting assessment from a source of fear to a shared understanding of learning goals. These practices communicate respect and fairness and reinforce trust between students and educators.

I offer choice where possible, which is an important dimension of teaching while holding. For example, allowing students to select topics, readings, or modes of engagement supports agency and voices, countering the sense of powerlessness that often accompanies traumatic experiences. This choice does not dilute academic rigour; instead, it enables students to engage more deeply by aligning learning with their interests, strengths, and lived realities. Similarly, embedding moments of pause and reflection within class sessions recognizes that sustained attention and emotional regulation are shaped by context and capacity, particularly in environments marked by stress or overload.

Relational connection is further fostered through collaborative learning activities that encourage peer engagement and collective problem-solving. These practices reflect Ubuntu's emphasis on learning as a communal process and help to counter isolation by creating spaces of mutual support and shared responsibility. Finally, remaining flexible where appropriate without abandoning standards signals care without compromising accountability. Flexibility, in this sense, is not leniency but a recognition that equity sometimes requires responsiveness to circumstance.

Taken together, these practices communicate to students that they are seen, respected, and valued not only for their academic output but also for their humanity. Teaching while holding becomes a relational enactment of trauma-informed and Ubuntu-informed pedagogy grounded in dignity, clarity, and ethical responsibility.



IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION

An Ubuntu-informed, trauma responsive approach to education in the social work classroom functions as a site of professional socialization for social work students. The classroom is one of the first spaces in which students learn not only about care but how care is enacted through relationships, boundaries, and respect. Social work education literature recognizes that professional values and ethical orientations are learned through modelling and relational experience, not only through formal instruction (Ingram, 2013; Munro, 2011). When educators model Ubuntu and trauma-informed principles such as attentiveness to dignity and safety, students encounter these values as lived ethics rather than abstract concepts (Letseka, 2012b; Mkhize, 2008b). In this way we teach students how to practice by demonstrating compassion and that professionalism can be exercised with humanity.

CONCLUSION

Teaching while holding is fundamentally an Ubuntu practice, offering a relational ethic that affirms dignity, mutual responsibility, and shared humanity within educational spaces. This article has argued that trauma-informed pedagogy finds coherence and grounding in Ubuntu, positioning teaching not as a neutral or technical task but as a moral and relational commitment to the wellbeing of learners.

The practice-based strategies shared illustrate how Ubuntu is enacted through everyday pedagogical choices that prioritize safety, clarity, collaboration, and care without compromising academic standards. By centering Ubuntu, trauma-informed pedagogy is reframed as a culturally grounded approach to education. It resists deficit-based models affirming learning as a collective humanizing process. Importantly, such pedagogical practices function as a site of professional formation. Once students experience Ubuntu-informed teaching, students internalize relational values that shape emerging professional identities. For social work educators, teaching through Ubuntu is not optional; it is an ethical responsibility aligned with the profession's core commitment to care and collective wellbeing.

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