

From Awareness to Advocacy:

Using Intimate Partner Violence Awareness Campaigns to Teach User Advocacy and Empathy in a Trauma-Informed Technical Communication Course

Lindsay Steiner,¹ Bryan Kopp,² and Kate Parker³

¹ University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

² University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

³ University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

Abstract

In this article, we describe how technical communication students explored user advocacy and coalitional action by creating trauma-informed, intimate partner violence (IPV) awareness campaigns for our campus. The nature of this project required us to develop a trauma-informed approach to teaching at the undergraduate level. To create a supportive community of practice for instructors and students, we used a lesson study methodology in which a team of teacher-researchers collaboratively designed, observed, analyzed, and revised a sequence of lessons.

We provide the larger context for our lesson study project, the lesson study structure including preparatory material for students, trauma-informed teaching strategies, and reflections on the lesson. To effect

meaningful change and learning, we needed to have difficult conversations with students; this required us to acknowledge the presence of trauma in the classroom and then work to support the students who have experienced trauma. Finally, we offer a reflective critique of our experience as a heuristic for instructors to use as they implement and reflect on trauma-informed pedagogy in their own classes.

Content Warning: The content of this article references rape and refers to violence against women in a way that relates to, but does not directly reference, transgender and non-binary individuals. We acknowledge, respect, and honor the many varied ways in which individuals respond to traumatic content. If you would like to speak with someone for support, please consider the RAINN National Sexual Assault Crisis Hotline:

- **Anonymous toll-free hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)**
- **Confidential online chat: <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>**

Introduction

Technical communication has long been rooted in user advocacy (Grabill & Simmons 1998; Johnson 1998; Friess 2010; Redish 2010; Jones 2016; Walton 2016; Martin, Carrington, & Muncie 2017). Listening to users about their unique and varied needs is a key aspect of being an effective and ethical technical communicator. Advocating for users based on their needs and attempting to effect positive change are steps towards socially-just technical communication. We follow Dr. Cecilia Shelton's (2020) pedagogical framing from her article "Shifting Out of Neutral: Centering Difference, Bias, and Social Justice in a Business Writing Course." Shelton explains that her "pedagogy...is meant to disrupt a pattern that values the myths of neutrality, objectivity, and the apolitical impact of technical and professional communication" (19). Students often come to an introductory class on Professional

and Technical Writing with misconceptions about technical communication that can be barriers to learning. Our goal at the outset was to emphasize rhetorical advocacy, especially for users, and inclusivity where we actively seek out, listen to, and amplify marginalized voices.

We describe in this article how technical communication students explored and practiced a trauma-informed coalitional approach to user advocacy by creating intimate partner violence (IPV) awareness campaigns for our campus. In addition to describing this pedagogical approach, we also offer a critical reflection on the experience and its limitations. Because the “users” for such campaigns include survivors of sexual assault as well as potential perpetrators, the social justice dimensions of advocacy move front and center. Following Rose (2016), we had to complicate user advocacy: “Social justice may also ask us to consider whom it is we speak of when we speak of users. Whose discomfort are we bearing witness to? Who can alleviate this discomfort? Looking further to marginalized, vulnerable, and potentially ignored groups can compel us to develop a more complex understanding of users” (429). With respect to mainstream IPV awareness, and advocacy campaigns more specifically, Edenfield (2019) argues that mainstream institutional approaches are often heteronormative and can “[exclude] a number of communities” (55). As a contrast to the more conventional approaches, Edenfield’s analysis of queer sexual consent artifacts demonstrates alternative approaches to advocacy work. Our project seeks to infuse trauma-informed work with the complexities of teaching inclusive user advocacy to technical communication students.

Understanding the complexities of user experiences, including affective responses such as discomfort, requires an interrogation of the relationships we have with users, otherwise we may participate in a process of othering or stereotyping. To do this relational work, faculty and students alike must be willing to work at the learning

edge, the space between their comfort zones and their danger zones, which necessarily involves a consideration of risk. This is especially true when centering on the traumatic experiences of IPV survivors. Implicit in our approach is an argument that “bearing witness to” or “sitting with” traumatic experiences—one’s own or others’—is integral to the work of survivor advocacy in a classroom or a university setting more generally.

Throughout this project, we have sought to engage in what Walton, Moore, & Jones (2019) have called coalitional action, foregrounding this question: “How might centering those whose bodies and experiences challenge the idea of the mythical norm shift or change your decisions, your practices, your assumptions?” (138). This question prompts critical reflection that can interrupt the ordinary work of teaching and learning in a technical communication classroom. Students who are quick to solve a problem or create a deliverable must slow down or pause when reflecting on trauma, and we, the instructors who are used to directing activities and designing and assessing student work, must reconsider learning outcomes among other things. Using a coalitional approach requires those “not living at the intersections of oppression to approach change-making with humility; to listen more than they speak or lead; and to sometimes divest themselves of self-serving plans, ideas, and ways forward” (Walton, Moore, & Jones 2019, 134). We found this to be true with respect to teaching as well as learning in a trauma-informed classroom.

Mindful of the institutional frames that define teacher and student roles and how they interact in both helpful and potentially harmful ways, we collaboratively developed the assignments and activities to be discussed below using an approach called lesson study, a teaching improvement activity with origins in Japanese elementary schools that was adapted by Cerbin and Kopp (2006) for use in higher education. Rather than design classroom assignments and activities in isolation, we brought together our various perspectives

in an effort to engage students—who may be thought of as the “users” of our instructional materials—in the kinds of questioning mentioned above. Our team consisted of Drs. Steiner and Kopp, who regularly teach professional and technical writing, and Dr. Parker, who has extensive experience with survivor advocacy in and out of the classroom. We co-designed a lesson sequence and then implemented and studied it. While one person taught each class episode, the others sat in the room as participants who could listen to student responses, take notes, and gather rich feedback to inform revisions of the lesson. Given the focus on traumatic experiences and affective responses, we also needed to be able to monitor the room and, as necessary, provide support for one another as well as for students. We sought to create a community of support as teachers so that we could acknowledge and work through the complex reality of this lesson with a community-based, social justice ethic that seeks to “redress inequities and acknowledge harm” by identifying and purposefully responding to positionality, privilege, and power (Jones, Moore, & Walton 2016). In order to effect meaningful change and learning, we needed to have difficult conversations with students; this required us to acknowledge the presence of trauma in the classroom and then work to support the students who have experienced trauma. However, in our attempts to create a supportive classroom, we did not fully achieve that goal, as we acknowledge below.

Institutional Context

We teach at a predominantly white institution in the upper Midwest, a regional comprehensive state university with 80% of our students matriculating from in-state. The course in which this lesson was taught—the department’s introduction to the Professional and Technical Writing minor—attracts not only English students but students from across the university. Despite the relatively homogenous demographic profile of our institution, we know that sexual violence on any campus is pervasive.

According to the 2020 Association of American Universities (AAU) Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Abuse and Sexual Misconduct, 26.4% of undergraduate female students and 6.8% of undergraduate male students experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation. Studies cited by Shannon Davidson (2017) show that 66% to 85% of youth will report lifetime traumatic event exposure prior to arriving at college, with many reporting multiple exposures, and as many as 50% of college students are exposed to a potentially traumatizing event in their first year of college (5). Further, we know that trauma disproportionately affects the most vulnerable marginalized populations at any institution of higher education: those who identify as womxn, students of color, trans*, LGBTQ+, Black, Latinx, Native, Indigenous, lower-income, and first-generation students (9-12). We acknowledge that trauma—and violence against women specifically—has an intersectional dimension that is, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) has demonstrated, the “product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” (1243). Trauma is not only a product of overlapping systems of oppression, subordination, and violence, but it also disproportionately impacts people with intersecting marginalized identities. As Crenshaw notes, mainstream institutional approaches to addressing traumatic experience, such as IPV awareness/advocacy campaigns, may exclude or even harm survivors who hold intersectional marginalized identities: “the fact that minority women suffer from the effects of multiple subordination, coupled with institutional expectations based on inappropriate nonintersectional contexts, shapes and ultimately limits the opportunities for meaningful intervention on their behalf” (1991, 1251). While our lesson focuses largely on the gendering of intimate partner violence and trauma, we acknowledge that trauma disproportionately and differentially impacts those with multiple intersecting marginalized identities and that—particularly at this moment in the United States—any discussion of trauma must also acknowledge the dimension of structural violence and institutionalized racism on our campuses

and in our communities (Mosley, Hargons, Meiller, Angyal, Wheeler, Davis, & Stevens-Watkins 2021).

Thus, the prevalence of trauma guarantees its presence as a complex, intersectional lived experience in our classrooms, as we learned throughout the study. Whether students and faculty acknowledge its presence—whether such traumas are made visible—any activities, texts, discussions, or deliverables produced in a classroom risk triggering or even retraumatizing students. As we've argued elsewhere (2021), texts and projects that may seem innocuous to faculty can evoke powerful affective and/or somatic responses from trauma victims. Faculty should anticipate such responses regardless of course content, although certainly topics explicitly focused on sexual violence and other kinds of trauma require a particular kind of care and approach in order for learning to happen. As Bessel van der Kolk (2014) has demonstrated, traumatized students cannot learn; it's physiologically impossible for a brain under siege to properly intake and process new information (70-71). As our lesson developed and was revised over the course of several classes and subsequent semesters, we began to focus increasingly on trauma-responsive practices in the classroom. These practices are designed to support and normalize emotional responses to lesson content in order to enable students to complete the rigorous intellectual work required in a technical communication class.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

In this article, we offer a reflection of our experience in and actionable strategies for implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in technical communication classes. We connect examples from our lesson study with principles of trauma-informed pedagogy. As a social justice approach to teaching technical communication, a trauma-informed pedagogy emphasizes community-building, equity, and the recognition of multiple, intersectional identities

among our students. Such an approach also allows students to understand the complex, intersectional identities of users, and can work to listen to, advocate for, and collaborate with users to design communication that is trauma-informed and socially-just. Through this work, we engaged in coalitional action as teacher-researchers *and* encouraged our students to engage in coalitional action as technical communicators in their IPV advocacy campaign projects (Walton, Moore, & Jones 2019). Our goal is that readers can take away strategies to help their students accomplish the goals we set out in the lesson for our students: 1) engage in difficult, challenging conversations about technical communication activity related to social justice issues; 2) practice critical rhetoric by negotiating the ethical implications of risk communication, such as IPV awareness campaigns; 3) assess and respond to the complexity and intersectionality of user perspectives and experiences; and 4) become action-oriented user advocates that work together for coalitional action and change. We also offer our critical reflection on this experience as a heuristic for readers to consider as a way to interrogate their own pedagogical approaches.

A trauma-informed classroom not only recognizes the impact of traumatic events, triggers, and stressors on students but attempts to promote safety, offer appropriate information about school and community resources, and assist students in managing distress in a predictable inclusive environment. The trauma-informed classroom is thus rooted in principles of a safe environment (whether a classroom can ever be fully “safe” for all students is up for debate and discussion, however), recognition of students’ experiences, resilience and growth mindset, and support-seeking. We also acknowledge the limitations of a trauma-informed classroom and encourage instructors to be aware of and proactive in compassionately setting boundaries. Defining clear and healthy boundaries is an important part of implementing a trauma-informed pedagogy that supports all students in their learning. Many topics relevant to a social justice-focused technical

communication curriculum may be particularly challenging for students, specifically those who have experienced or are experiencing trauma.

The Lesson Context

Regularly offered in the fall and spring, Introduction to Professional and Technical Writing is an introductory course for our department's Professional and Technical Writing minor and certificate. It is also an option in the core curriculum for our four major emphases: English Writing and Rhetoric, Literary and Cultural Studies, English for Medical Professions, and English Education. The cap for this course is 20 students, many of whom have majors other than English. This course focuses on theories, histories, and concepts from the field, as well as the application and analysis of professional and technical writing documents in different genres and modalities. The course description is as follows:

This course is designed as an introductory course for students who are interested in writing in professional settings. The course will include an introduction to various field definitions of professional and technical writing, an overview of professional and technical writing history and theory, provide space to study key concepts that are currently relevant in the field, and apply these histories and concepts to concrete documents that constitute study in the field of professional and technical writing.

The course description aligns with the shape of our lesson, which introduced students to “key concepts...currently relevant to the field” and then asked them to “apply these...concepts to concrete documents that constitute study in the field of professional and technical writing.”

This lesson fits into a unit on ethics and user advocacy, which typically occurs near the middle of the semester. Several course student learning outcomes (SLOs) intersect with this lesson, but especially the following, from the syllabus: “Understand ethics as a core component to professional and technical writing theory and practice” and “Awareness of audience and users; to understand needs and expectations, to empathize, to assist, and to plan what needs to be done next” (2020, 2-3). The learning goals for this lesson asked students to: 1) engage in difficult, challenging conversations about social justice issues; 2) practice critical rhetoric by negotiating the ethical implications of risk communication; 3) assess and respond to the complexity of user perspectives, expectations, and experiences; and 4) recognize and appreciate the value of user advocacy.

The Lesson Sequence

The shared lesson took place across two consecutive course days, although the instructor of record dedicated additional class sessions to reviewing and revising deliverables and connecting the lesson to the larger unit goals. In this section, we provide an overview of the lesson and activities.

Preparation

In preparation for the first day, in which students were introduced to three examples of campus sexual violence awareness campaigns (The Red Flag Campaign, the Panhellenic Toolkit, and It’s on Us), they were asked to review a content warning along with readings, resources, and a set of helpful definitions (for example: distinguishing intimate partner violence from legal rape). Prior to class, students had read articles by Katz (1992) on the ethic of expediency and Grabill and Simmons (1998) on user advocacy.

Prior to the lesson, we shared a content warning, reprinted in its entirety here:

Content Warning for Students: Over the next few classes, we will be discussing material that makes overt visual and textual references to sexual and intimate partner violence, including sexual assault. Separately and then together, we will review three IPV (intimate partner violence) awareness campaigns, some of which depict sexual aggression and violence as imminent threats. We will be discussing triggers and watching a video where IPV survivors discuss their triggers. We will also hear a survivor's story.

We recognize that this material may be upsetting to you, and some of you may experience strong or triggering feelings when asked to review and discuss it. For this reason, we have given you the opportunity to self-select which of these materials you feel most comfortable reviewing before class, and we want to make clear that we don't expect you to look at anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe. We have also given careful thought to the materials we will look at together in class, and while we cannot fully anticipate how these materials might make you feel, we are available and willing to explain our choice of the materials we will review together as a group.

We want to support you and can be flexible if you find you are unable to participate in these class sessions. However, we would like to remind you that we are **mandatory reporters**, and, as per the statement on the syllabus, are "obligated to disclose any detailed or specific information we receive about such incidents involving a member of this campus, regardless of whether the incident takes place on

campus or off.” If you find yourself triggered or upset by this material and would like to talk to someone about it, we want to let you know that there are *confidential resources* available on campus, and we have listed their names and contact information below.

We care about your well-being and recognize that this course material and assignment could lend itself to disclosure, but you should not share any details of an incident with us until you have discussed your options with a confidential reporter.

Our content warning was detailed and specific, allowing students to be fully aware of possible risks and harms, and to make informed choices about self-care and whether or not they would feel comfortable attending this class. At least one student asked for an alternative assignment (which we had prepared) and did not attend class during this lesson.

Preparation, we found, is a key support strategy. These readings, conversations, and projects that detail and engage personal trauma intersect with the complex lived experiences of students. In the content warning and the accompanying resources, we aimed to describe, with complete transparency, the work of the class, why specific texts and projects were chosen, the kinds of discussions we anticipated, and the possibility that any person in the classroom (including the instructors themselves) may become uncomfortable at times. Resources that encouraged and normalized help-seeking emphasized that people needing support are not alone, that trauma is widely experienced and thus wholly anticipated, and that there are locations and structures in place to assist. Given the statistics cited above, we expected (rather than feared or ignored) that students in our classroom *were* experiencing traumas past or present before, during, or after any class period, but certainly after a lesson that explicitly engaged sexual and intimate partner

violence in a college classroom. For this reason, we strove to cultivate a classroom climate that encouraged students to freely enter and leave the physical institutional space—or to request to be absent altogether—with the knowledge and security established that an instructor would follow up and check-in with offers of support. (We included contact information for not only the instructor of record but the observing instructors as well to offer students multiple resources.) We learned that early interventions like content warnings are crucial, but that support must extend far beyond these in order to normalize the experience and ubiquity of trauma itself.

Lesson Day 1

Students then reviewed three intimate partner violence (IPV) campaigns that we chose based on divergent approaches, audiences, and messages. The Panhellenic Toolkit (2017) is a resource aimed at sororities (and thus speaking rather exclusively to womxn) which consisted of a number of links and strategies grouped into categories, such as “Consent and healthy relationships” and “Campus safety: laws and policies.” Given the audience, the focus is on empowering through knowledge-building and awareness-raising, and, as a “toolkit” for sororities, the intention is for these resources to be shared and discussed in group settings and ignite action through education. The Red Flag Campaign (2005), a for-profit campaign that can be purchased by campuses (and is currently used at hundreds of universities), uses a bystander intervention strategy. Images include survivors holding up “red flags” to share intimate relationship concerns paired with speech bubbles that directly intervene. For example, a woman holds a “red flag” that reads “He said if I really loved him, I’d have sex with him,” with a response that counters “If he really loved you, he wouldn’t push you.” While many of the “red flags” represent victim concerns and offer empathic responses, there are some “red flags” that speak from the perspective of the perpetrators

themselves: i.e., a red flag, held in front of a white college-aged male's mouth, that reads "If I want to get some, I just need to get her wasted." While the included response is marginally interventionist, we wanted students to identify and discuss the problem of triggering visuals. This ad depicts an aggressive message held in place of a white college-aged man's mouth coupled with an intense stare directly at the camera. The response does not appeal so much to the perpetrator's ethics nor the target victim's humanity, but rather the desire to evade possible legal consequences: the bubble responds, "That's messed up. Are you looking to catch a rape charge?" Students appropriately determined that The Red Flag Campaign mixed its messages: survivors were encouraged to help-seek and take action to protect themselves, but perpetrators were also given a platform to voice their aggressions, strategies, and dehumanizing language around sexual and intimate partner violence.

The final campaign, *It's on Us* (2014), was chosen because it was a campaign that had been brought to our university in 2016-2017 by our Student Association (partnering with the Office of Violence Prevention and the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department). "It's On Us" is a White House initiative aimed at "calling in" students to raise awareness of, and advocate for, sexual violence prevention on college campuses. Students are encouraged to create content (digital, video, social media) that shows them holding hand-lettered signs conveying advocacy-oriented messages like "#It'sOnUs To Always Do the Right Thing." Additionally, the website has a wealth of resources, including promotional video content, and centers around the "It's On Us" pledge, which concludes with a promise "To CREATE an environment in which sexual assault is unacceptable and survivors are supported." During group work, many students in the class expressed enthusiasm about this campaign and its rallying and affirmative message, which they felt aligned with their groups' (wholly unrealistic) goals to, as one student put it, "end sexual

assault on UWL's campus by 2025." Though undeniably a powerful campaign, we prompted students to note that the campaign was less about *survivor experience* and more about rallying community around a cause—which could be, in equal parts, empowering and alienating for a survivor of trauma.

As we reviewed these materials—and as our lesson entered its second and third iterations, revising and building on what we had previously learned—we focused on developing a classroom atmosphere that raises awareness of the presence of trauma—specifically, in this case, sexual violence—in a way that investigates institutional and socially-sanctioned forms of silencing victims while asking students to imagine ways in which such campaigns might *truly* empower and support a trauma-informed culture on campus. As we developed and refined our trauma-informed approach to this discussion, we combined the analysis and discussion of these campaigns with references to help-seeking and self-care resources and, on Day 2 of the lesson, welcomed a sexual assault survivor into the classroom to share her story as a means of underscoring the complex lived realities of surviving intimate partner violence. (We realize that this option was unique to our lesson as we had a speaker who had shared her story publicly for many years willing to join our students and speak to her experiences. This might not necessarily be replicable in other classrooms.) Her narrative is discussed in more depth below, but for the moment we wish to note that the classroom becomes, for instructors seeking to be more trauma-informed, a balancing act when student perspectives vary so widely, and when the need to educate students who have not (yet) experienced trauma—who may hold outright misconceptions—must be weighed against the possible detrimental impacts on survivors also in the classroom. How do we teach students to do the difficult work of user advocacy when they may be experiencing/have experienced trauma themselves?

Lesson Day 2

At the end of Day 1, students complete a reflective informal writing assignment, identifying questions, needs, concerns, or challenges they encountered as they reflected on the IPV awareness campaigns; further, they are asked to detail possible action steps for the creation of an IPV campaign on our university's campus. To achieve this, students arrived in class on Day 2 with their writing assignments; the instructor set some overarching parameters to the assignment, namely: their campaign should effectively raise awareness and mediate action, and their campaign should effectively engage "users" of the campaign, including survivors. Additionally, the class discussed institutional responsibilities, such as "acknowledg[ing] there is a complex problem involving real risks," "mak[ing] a concerted effort to address the problem/risks," and "maintain[ing] a safe environment and positive public image." The students then formed teams to begin work on developing a campaign.

Our first time teaching the lesson did not include a survivor's story, and we found that many students had difficulty in connecting to the complexities of living a traumatic experience. In other words, there was a tendency on the part of students to think reductively about survivors' anticipated responses to a given campaign. After watching a brief video on triggers and retraumatization, which featured the story of a man retraumatized by the pattern of the bedspread on which he was raped, one group of students felt that introducing triangles into their design was "too triggering" because of the sharp angles involved. Another group designed a poster entirely in teal—the color of sexual assault awareness. Reviewing these too-easy responses, we felt students needed a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of trauma. A faculty member who knew about our study offered to tell her story in class; she had spoken publicly about her assault for many years. In the subsequent iterations of the lesson, this survivor shared her story

of being date-raped and then diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result. Over the course of this interactive presentation, it became clear that living in the aftermath of trauma is not an experience that can be neatly addressed by, for example, soft-edged graphics, but in fact necessitates a different approach: one of compassion and active listening *prior* to writing action steps and creating shareable content.

The decision to center our lesson on the lived experience of survivors shifted our initial focus from highlighting social justice concerns in technical communication studies to developing and implementing trauma-informed principles in the classroom. Our initial goal of the lesson study was to practice and introduce difficult conversations into the professional and technical writing classroom, but, as detailed below, our goal shifted to focus on the lived experience of survivors and the need for a classroom climate that authentically supports all students—especially those who have experienced trauma. Through integrating coalitional action with trauma-informed pedagogy, our goal was to work towards centering the voices, experiences, and needs of those disproportionately affected by trauma.

Leaning into the Learning Edge

The “learning edge” is a core concept in social justice education (SJE) advanced in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, an essential collection of SJE resources (Adams, Bell, Goodman and Joshi 2016). Educators empower students to identify and then self-reflectively monitor their own affective response to learning in the classroom. That students will be pushed out of their comfort zone is a near-certainty in any class dedicated to social justice topics; the concept of a “learning edge” encourages students to walk the boundary between productive discomfort and actual stress or distress (a “danger zone”) in which learning, processing, or

retaining information becomes impossible. As we planned our lesson, we embraced the pedagogical value of a learning edge, but its classroom applications raised unexpected ethical questions and dilemmas.

It goes without saying that what is a “learning edge” for one student may be a comfort zone, or a danger zone, for another. But when the lived experience of sexual violence *becomes* the lesson itself, students who identify as trauma survivors inevitably identify with the “case study” through which non-traumatized students are being asked to navigate, articulate, and manage their affective responses. One result is that trauma survivors are asked to sit in a classroom while non-traumatized students describe and articulate their own emotional challenges in engaging with narratives of sexual assault, alienating and even retraumatizing survivors in an attempt to raise awareness and advocacy among non-survivors. For us, this raised a larger question about the ethics of pedagogical goals that “disrupt” the worldview of privileged students (in this case, non-traumatized students) at the expense of retraumatizing the survivors—often silent and rendered invisible—in the classroom. These questions also implicated our original motivation for this lesson study in the first place: does the call to introduce difficult conversations into a classroom unintentionally overlook the very reason such conversations are difficult in the first place—precisely that they explore and probe the lived “difficult” experiences of marginalized others? Does the learning edge disrupt privilege, as intended, or does it unwittingly reinforce it?

One alternative, of course, is silence—*not* engaging in such conversations in the first place. But this is not plausible, nor is it ethical or responsible, especially in the moment of #metoo and a developing national awareness of the disproportionate acts of sexual violence against the most vulnerable populations in the U.S.: genderqueer and trans* people; Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC); incarcerated people; and those experiencing

food or housing insecurities (National Crime Victimization Survey 2019). It is also at best naïve and at worst negligent in a college classroom, given that women ages 18-24 are at an elevated risk of sexual violence, that this type of violence is more prevalent at college in comparison to other crimes, and that college-age victims of sexual violence often do not report to law enforcement and only 1 in 5 seek victim resources (RAINN: Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network 2020). This means that discussions about the prevalence of sexual violence have the *potential* to not only raise awareness and foster advocacy on behalf of survivors but to offer knowledge of existing resources and a broader social contextualization of lived experience that might inspire help-seeking and even promote healing among survivors themselves.

Such dilemmas are not uncommon in teaching that touches upon or engages directly trauma and/or sexual violence. Corrine C. Bertram and M. Sue Crowley (2012) characterize this, in part, as “the disguise of openness” where the open discussion of sexual violence in classrooms “places survivors at risk” as “their lived experiences are referenced in ways that may expose them to additional, insidious trauma” (64). Central to this problem is the belief of well-meaning instructors that “open discussions” about traumatizing topics and material offer a necessary corrective to dominant narratives of (white, male) privilege; however, “this relative openness disguises the concomitant lack of change in the attitudes about and incidence of sexual violence” (64). In other words: simply because you are *talking* about sexual violence in your class doesn’t mean anything is actually changing. Further, because the institutional contexts of a college classroom typically do not allow instructors or students to “subvert dominant norms about either sex or violence,” what remains is what Bertram and Crowley call “the false comfort of concern”: “emotional evocations of sympathy [that] often serve as a form of avoidance.” “[W]hile sympathy may feel good in the immediate context,” they continue,

“it does nothing to change the enduring conditions that contribute to sexual violence” (65).

As we reflect on this project here, we must acknowledge that most of our students did not move far beyond the “false comfort of concern,” as we detail above in describing the lesson. In other words, while we centered the experiences of survivors by making students’ encounter with a survivor’s narrative a pivotal moment in the lesson, it would be difficult to say the students understood how to “empower” survivors through the projects they produced. By explicitly centering the lesson on survivor’s experiences, we tacitly acknowledged that most classrooms do not center or even acknowledge the experience of trauma. We also risked alienating or even retraumatizing students in the class who were victims of trauma for the goal of making the comfortable students *slightly* less so. (Given Bertram and Crowley’s formulation above, we may have inadvertently made non-traumatized students *more* comfortable by offering them a clear and sanctioned way of expressing “concern” and thus avoiding the difficulty of engaging the emotional and psychological complexities of surviving trauma.) In our reflections, we had to acknowledge that there is no equivalence between experiencing a trauma and having to *hear* about one: the emphasis we placed on managing non-traumatized students’ emotions around the topic did not necessarily address the struggles—largely invisible—that traumatized students may have felt as they listened to their peers “learn” about surviving sexual violence. As instructors who strive to be trauma-informed in our classroom, we acknowledge that more can, and should, be done to support student survivors in classes that deal directly with traumatic content.

Critical Reflection on our Trauma-Informed Pedagogy Experience

As we reflected across iterations of the lesson and imagined various teaching scenarios to which we might have to respond, we encountered the following set of examples, which paints the challenge of trauma-informed teaching starkly. In considering our reflection here, we hope that readers might also critically reflect on and interrogate their own pedagogical practices and find ways to infuse coalitional action and trauma-informed teaching strategies in their classrooms and research. We hope that these scenarios may offer a reflective heuristic for readers to engage in this important and challenging work.

Some students in our classes may have experienced a traumatic episode only to find themselves in class the very same day seeking normalcy. Or they may be reliving past traumas as they struggle to sit still, concentrate, and learn. Others may experience the intersection of powerful institutional dynamics that reinforce structural oppression alongside course content: those who suffer from PTSD, for example, may bear the brunt of blanket attendance policies or policies against leaving the classroom during lecture. As discussed above, carefully-chosen content may retraumatize survivors despite hopes that it might empower them. And other students may be entirely apathetic, unaffected, and unaware of these surging undercurrents, which proves additionally complicated for a survivor navigating class discussion and group work, not to mention a faculty member facilitating these discussions.

Instructors may be reluctant to center the experiences of trauma survivors in a technical communication classroom because the risks of retraumatizing some students may seem to outweigh the benefits of increasing awareness in others. However, avoidance of such topics does not guarantee that students will not have trauma-

related experiences in the classroom (they will); furthermore, students may be retraumatized regardless of instructor actions. In other words, living on a campus where there is trauma means risk is always already present. Not talking about the risks that accompany trauma may give instructors a false sense of security and make them less likely to incorporate trauma-informed principles into their teaching. These principles are more than course enhancements; they can make an enormous difference in the lives of students, most critically by raising awareness of support services and resources. By providing content warnings, offering alternative assignments, maintaining an open-door policy, monitoring the room, and using other trauma-informed strategies, we acknowledge risk *so that* we can better support survivors. As an added benefit, students not presently experiencing the effects of trauma (their own or others') become more knowledgeable about trauma-informed principles, which they can carry into future organizational and professional contexts. Every workplace, not to mention classroom, should be trauma-informed. Being *uninformed* is a greater risk given the stakes of trauma.

What is perhaps most compelling about these scenarios is that they are unfolding regardless of whether we embrace the challenges they present. [Our web resource](#), developed for our university's Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning, details a framework for trauma-informed pedagogy that not only recognizes the impact of traumatic events, triggers, and stressors on students, but actively works to promote safety, offer appropriate information about university and community resources, and assist students in managing distress in a predictable, inclusive environment (Kopp, Parker & Steiner 2020). The trauma-informed classroom is thus rooted in principles of a safe environment, recognition of students' authentic experiences, resilience and growth mindset, and support-seeking. While there are inherent challenges to trauma-informed teaching (e.g., the need for instructors to be aware of and proactive in setting compassionate and transparent boundaries), it

can, when properly implemented, enable community-building, promote equity, acknowledge the recognition of multiple intersectional identities among our students, and cultivate a healthy environment of trust, challenge, and risk-taking. When doing such work, we are left with reassurances: this is a commitment to students' lives and experiences, and it is one that is made possible by a classroom that acknowledges, engages, and supports students through a fuller, more complete, and less stigmatized understanding of trauma.

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About the Authors

Dr. Lindsay Steiner is Associate Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse with a focus on professional and technical writing/technical communication. She has published in *Programmatic Perspectives* (2020), *Content Strategy in Technical Communication* (2019), and *Literacy in Practice* (2016). She is also a member of an interdisciplinary research team focusing on trauma-informed pedagogy with a recent publication in *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830* (2021). In addition, Dr. Steiner has presented research at national meetings of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication, and Conference on College Composition and Communication. She teaches courses in professional and technical writing and is the University Writing Programs Coordinator.

Dr. Bryan Kopp is Associate Professor and Associate Chair of English at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse where he specializes in rhetorical genre studies, cultural studies and critical theory, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. He has published in the *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, and the edited collections *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (2010), *Writing Majors: Eighteen Program Profiles* (2015), and *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing WAC Programs* (2018). He is also a member of an interdisciplinary research team focusing on trauma-informed pedagogy, with a recent publication in *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830* (2021). In addition, Dr. Kopp has presented research at national meetings of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and most recently the Council on Undergraduate Research: Centering Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Undergraduate Research and Creative

Activity. He is the Teaching and Learning Specialist in UWL's Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning.

Dr. Kate Parker is Associate Professor and Chair of English at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse where she specializes in eighteenth-century French and British literature, and feminist, gender, and sexuality studies. She is the co-editor of three collections (on poetry and the rise of the novel, the Marquis de Sade, and teaching the eighteenth century) and has published essays on Sade, the poet James Thomson, the novelist Eliza Haywood, early modern erotic studies, and the intersections of feminist criticism and translation theory. She is also a member of an interdisciplinary research team focusing on trauma-informed pedagogy with a recent publication in *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830* (2021). She presents regularly at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Eighteenth Century Studies. She serves as the Inclusive Teaching Specialist in UWL's Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning.

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