

A PANACEA FOR LOSS: CULTIVATING A SAFE, AFFIRMING ENGLISH CLASSROOM



By Rebekah O'Dell

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Abstract: Our classrooms have not been the same since the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools and forced us to rethink everything we know about teaching. While much of the public conversation has centered on *learning loss*, the author instead found that personal loss and collective trauma have had the strongest impact on defining the differences between her students before and her students after the pandemic. Leaning on Alex Shevrin Venet's *Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education* (2021), this article examines four essential principles for classroom-decision making (predictability, flexibility, empowerment, and connection) and connects them to practical routines for secondary English teachers to create more compassionate learning spaces where students and adults alike can heal from trauma and move forward.

Keywords: COVID-19, trauma-informed teaching, English education, loss, compassionate classroom

My daughter, now in sixth grade, carries a folded-up shopping bag in her backpack every day. I did not know this until we packed her bag for the first day of school this past August.

"Oh! I need a bag!" she exclaimed, running to the pantry to grab one. "You never know when the teachers are going to tell you to take home all of your books, so it is better to be ready."

Until that moment, I had not considered the trauma of that last day before spring break in March 2020.

Of being a child feeling butterflies of excitement anticipating a week of vacation doused by the disorienting, last-minute, slightly panicked administrative orders to "have students

take all of their belongings home. All of them. Today" (J. Stargell, personal communication, March 6, 2020). Of not knowing what is happening. Of not knowing if you are safe. Of not knowing when you will return.

A second grader at the time of the shutdown, my daughter does not consciously long for the *before* times the way that I sometimes do. She does not even mark time as before COVID-19 and after COVID-19. Our family was lucky—we did not lose family members to the virus; we did not even get sick in that first wave. But all that fear and uncertainty and upheaval and instability—it is still in her somewhere deep, etched into her DNA the way indelible childhood experiences always are.

It is etched into us too.

Life as We Knew It

Even though we had been ordered to have students take all of their belongings home for spring break because "we might be out for a couple extra weeks" (J. Stargell, personal communication, March 6, 2020), I did not really *know* until my husband and I walked through the doors of Boston's Logan Airport on March 11, 2020. Dropping the kids off with my parents days before, we had embarked on an epic adventure: a mountaineering class and climb in New Hampshire's White Mountains.

We had been off the grid as we learned things like the difference between Swiss and French mountaineering techniques and how to save ourselves from sliding off a mountain by throwing our ice axes into the snow. (Spoiler: I surely would have died.) Our guide, Mark, told us he was planning to hike in the United Kingdom the following month because, he assured us, "This virus thing is not a big deal."

Three days later, we ended our adventure by spending 10 hours climbing a snow-peaked mountain and taking pictures at the summit—legs thigh-deep in snow, wind roaring past our ears. We climbed down Mount Monroe and returned to a quiet country inn, reveling in our success.

We were none the wiser.

The world seemed as it always had until we dropped off our rental car and entered the cavernous, ghost-town airport. Evan and I looked at each other quizzically. “This is weird,” we noted as we walked straight through security toward our gate.

Some restaurants were already shuttered. The few fellow passengers we saw spoke in hushed tones or stared blankly ahead. A young ABC-sitcom star we recognized whispered frantically into a cell phone while gesturing to the departures board. It was chillingly apparent that we had missed something, and that, without warning, we were now living in an *after*. We had moved from *White Christmas* to *Station Eleven* in the blink of an eye.

When we boarded, our plane was nearly empty. It was the last time I would ever fly without wearing a mask. When we returned home, everything looked similar, but nothing was the same.

Welcome to Your COVID-19 Classroom

My students and I survived virtual school and then hybrid school and then half-day learning cohorts—requiring teachers to stay and teach an extra hour every day. Then, occasionally, we navigated one class split into two classrooms for extra distance, taught from a microphone in the hallway, and hid behind plexiglass and masks.

Eventually, years later, we returned to *normal* school, and everything looked similar. But nothing was the same.

Specifically, my students were not the same. They looked and talked like middle schoolers, but something nearly imperceptible had shifted. It took some time to figure out what I was seeing in my classroom: What was not quite connecting? What was that behind their eyes?

It was not learning loss. It was loss—pure loss.

Looking around, every student in my class had lost something: a family member, a parent’s job, a sense of security in the world itself, and more that I did not know or could not understand. Trauma had become a collective experience (Tayles, 2021, p. 295)—one I was unprepared to teach into. In her indispensable book *Equity-Centered, Trauma-Informed Education*, author Alex Shevrin Venet (2021) reminds us that “to recover from trauma, we first need to reestablish a feeling of safety, emotionally and psychologically” (p. XV). While I was trying to teach reading and writing, my students needed something more—or at least something else—first.

My career has felt like a 19-year journey of letting go—each year becoming more open, more responsive. COVID-19 was a tipping point for throwing away all the rules and strictures that I still clung to. I had to rethink things that I thought made me a good teacher at the cost of having a truly compassionate, human-centered teaching practice. Knowing that now, more than ever, “trauma impacts us all” (Venet, 2021, p. 44), I needed to make a shift, not by ignoring reading and writing but by making trauma-informed decisions that would benefit every single reader and writer in my classroom.

Venet gives us a starting place. She suggests that teachers and schools should focus on four priorities when making trauma-informed decisions that will benefit all students:

- predictability
- flexibility
- empowerment
- connection

These four pillars have become the tentpoles of my post-COVID-19 instruction, my English-class panacea for loss.

My Trauma-Informed English Classroom

Trauma-informed teaching, also referred to as pedagogies of care (Columbia University Center for Teaching and Learning, 2023), is not designed to only meet the needs of the traumatized. Like a classroom centered on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a trauma-informed classroom is proactive, preventative, and holistic (Venet, 2021, pp. 52, 55)—meaning that it affirms, supports, and benefits every learner.

The trauma-informed English class I have worked to cultivate over the last couple of years achieves this through the classroom routines of reading and writing. In so many respects, our work looks the same as it ever did. The changes are sometimes small. In between the lines of all we read, all we write, and all we discuss, I have leaned in to becoming a teacher who “care[s] for our students, not just care[s] about them” (Venet, 2021, p. 100).

Let us look at two ways I have realized each of Venet’s principles in the four walls of my classroom.

Predictability

Embracing predictability gives me mental, emotional, and logistical bandwidth to teach into inevitable unpredictability that crops up in a given class period (Clayton, 2021). When things go awry in ways both large and small, I know I have structures and rhythms in place on which we can all fall back.

But it is not just teachers who benefit from predictability; it also gives students safe space to think, process, work, and learn. According to the Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project, “consistency creates trust that the adults can provide safety” (2023, Consistency & Predictability section, para. 3). My students know what will happen each day in my class, and they know that I will provide a safe place for them to learn. Without this consistency—a consistency I have to work to maintain from the beginning of the school year to the end—there is a greater chance students will become dysregulated as they try to guess-and-check their way through every class period as they wonder what will happen next (TREP, 2023, Consistency & Predictability section, para. 4). When students feel safe, know what to expect, and know what will be expected of them, they have an increased capacity to learn.

Here are two ways I have built predictability into my class.

Employ Predictable Routines

I have seen that my students are able to learn more effectively when they are not anxiously wondering what we will do in class each day. This settles my mind too! My class has a consistent rhythm that we practice from the first day of school to the last. Our routine goes like this:

- Time for independent reading,
- Reading or writing strategy lesson,
- Time for practicing the strategy in our own reading or writing while conferring with the teacher, and
- Sharing and wrapping up.

These predictable pieces give all of us mental space and emotional capacity to learn. Take, for example, our routine reading/writing and conferring time each day. Knowing that we will be applying what we learn in our lesson each day helps focus students, and as the lesson progresses, they begin to internally prepare themselves for application because they know it is coming. Even more importantly, they know they will have time one-to-one with me if they need it.

I have a conferring table in the back of my room. After the lesson each day, I head to the back and wait there for any students who need to confer. A few days ago, Haydn raced to the back table and plopped down. When I asked him what was happening in his paper that he needed to chat about so desperately, he chuckled and said, “Oh, nothing. It’s just been an awful day. I can’t concentrate. I just need to talk.” Haydn knows that there will be time to talk with an adult if he needs to every day. He knows the routines he can count on, and he knows those routines can support his emotional life as well as his academic needs.

Create Time and Space to Settle, Adjust, and Breathe

The concept of “teaching bell to bell” was ingrained in me as the pinnacle of great teaching. If I could start as soon as the students walked in and teach without stopping—or letting them stop—until the bell rang again, I would know that they were learning. (Oh, the things we believe as early-career teachers.)

However, since COVID-19 in particular, my students have struggled to get started right away, to sustain their learning energy for extended periods of time, and to transition between activities without devolving into absolute chaos. Being able to predict these challenges has helped me slow down and set aside intentional time for settling. My students know that we begin class with time to settle with our independent reading books—15 minutes of quiet they can count on. Quietly reading for even just six minutes can reduce stress by 70% (Taylor, 2019, p. 38). And when it is taken away by vagaries of the calendar and scheduling, they revolt! Students in my class can also predict that we will have time for recentering after each segment of the class period. It might look like this:

1. Independent reading
2. Movement break
3. Minilesson
4. Turn + Talk
5. 3 rounds of square breathing as a class
6. Time for writing + conferring

Flexibility

It might seem like predictability and flexibility would be dueling goals, but predictability makes space for flexibility. When both my students and I know what to expect as our learning rhythm, knowing there will be time to settle and breathe, we can all come to class less anxious and more ready to roll with whatever punches come our way. In other words, we are equipped to be more flexible.

Flexibility may also mean adjusting business-as-usual to find ways to relieve students’ stress within the expectations of our course. The Columbia University Center for Teaching and Learning suggests adjusting due dates to meet students’ individual needs, using more frequent low stakes assessments instead of one or two large assessments, and allowing students to choose more flexible formats, like multimedia projects or presentations, for final assessments instead of essays and tests (2023).

Over the last two years, flexibility has become an essential element of my class.

Allow Students to Choose What They Need

Venet (2021) defines flexibility as having “opportunities to check in and notice what we need” (p. 75). In my class, this often means choosing how we work while all achieving the same goals. For starters, during independent reading and work time, students choose where they work. While some students do appreciate spreading their work out on a table, I have three big, comfy chairs in my

classroom that students fight over. Some choose to read and write on their bellies on the rugs. Occasionally a student will crawl under a table to work in peace.

Another way I build flexibility is by allowing students to choose how they annotate. With the understanding that academic reading requires cataloging our thinking, students choose the way they want to accomplish that: through traditional marginal notes, Post-It™ Pauses, sketchnoting, or stop-and-jots.

Sometimes brains just need a reset. Students need to recognize when they are unregulated and find ways to self-regulate again, and we need to explicitly teach a menu of flexible strategies to meet students’ needs. Teach students how to use a thought pad, a self-talk script, and the Pomodoro technique (a structured series of shorter periods of focus) to focus, notice when they are getting off track, and refocus again (University of Pittsburgh, n.d.).

Provide Freedom in How Students Learn and Demonstrate Their Learning

While my job is to ensure that students meet the learning objectives for our course, I can be flexible in how students move through and demonstrate that learning.

Providing students with choice gives them agency over their learning that, in turn, develops a sense of control and safety. Choice boards are one way to give students the ability to choose what they want to learn. Choice boards give students options for learning, often in multiple modalities, and have the added bonus of promoting “engagement, motivation and connections to learning” (Malinoski, 2022, p. 116). I particularly love choice boards for writing instruction. Put six writing strategies on a choice board and ask students to study and use two strategies they believe will improve their writing.

We can be flexible in not just how students learn but also how they demonstrate that learning. Students invariably rise to the challenge when they are allowed to choose how they want to show their learning in a given unit. In English class, this might mean creating a persuasive video instead of a persuasive essay or recording a podcast to analyze a text instead of using paper. Can they meet the learning objectives and use the strategies they have been taught? If so, I can be flexible in how I receive that learning from them.

Empowerment

Trauma and loss are always mired in disempowerment. Something you do not want to happen has happened, and there is nothing you can do to control it. Finding ways to give students a voice in their own education—allowing them to claim and use their power at school (Venet, 2021, p. 69)—creates a more humane learning environment. This might include small changes like allowing students to choose when they leave class to use the restroom or larger changes like giving students a voice in school-wide decision-making.

Within our classroom and curriculum, we can empower students by trusting them to make choices over their own learning. We need to make a shift from being “controllers” of a student’s education to becoming a “strengths-focused supporter” of learning (Harper & Neubauer, 2021, p. 11).

Give Students Voice in What They Read and Write

While certainly not a new concept, giving students choice in what they read and the topics on which they write empowers students to discover and pursue their interests and use their voices to communicate their passions. Plus, we know that choice “leads to higher engagement and enthusiasm” (Roberts, 2018, p. 17), making choice another win-win for teachers and students alike.

Choice is not an all-or-nothing binary. We can offer students choice periodically throughout the year, or we can offer limited choice through book clubs and genre studies. If we want our students to feel empowered at school, we have to make space for their voice to be heard within the curriculum. During the COVID-19 years, especially the early ones, students lost so much of their agency and decision-making power as humans and as learners. We can give that power back to them, in part, by making spaces in our reading and writing curriculum for students to self-select their reading and writing.

Create Opportunities for Regular Self-Assessment and Reflection

My feedback should never be the final word on a student's learning. Making time for intentional self-assessment empowers students to evaluate progress toward learning goals—concretely giving them a say in assessment. Have students fill out a copy of a rubric for themselves as they reflect on what went well and where they need more help. Use a Google Form at the end of class to capture which learning strategies students tried during that class period and how those strategies helped (or did not help!) them learn. Ask writers to create author's notes about a piece of writing, walking a reader through the highs and lows of their individual writing process.

Even when it has nothing to do with the gradebook, self-assessment democratizes the assessment process. The deep level of metacognition happening in regular reflection also improves learning outcomes—students become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, see patterns in their behavior and learning, and improve skill transfer (Chick, 2013).

Connection

While all four of these pillars are important and rely on one another, connection is arguably the strongest force for healing in a school environment. Connection is also arguably the biggest loss we all experienced during and since the pandemic. Decades of research affirm that the number and quality of a student's relationships is one of the strongest predictors of positive mental health (Venet, 2021, p. 70). It is critical for students to feel connected not just to adults at school but also to peers and the world around them.

In English class, we are lucky; the ways we foster connection are woven into the fabric of our curriculum. Books provide one of the best ways to allow students to see themselves and connect them to the world outside school. Small book clubs are a conduit to build relationships with one another.

Just the act of writing about one's experiences, thoughts, and opinions is "healthcare" in itself; writing can serve a "similar healing function as talk therapy" and can be just as "restorative as talking about them with someone else" (Chiew, 2021, p. 2). Through writing, students not only heal but also forge connections within themselves and with authentic audiences. Most powerfully, they also watch their voices move into the world.

Co-Create Learning Walls

In *Leading with a Lens of Inquiry*, Jessica Vance (2022) argues that "the more we connect and make clear that we value [students'] voices, the more we build trust" (p. 101). One way she suggests teachers foster this inquiry-based trust is through the co-creation of learning walls. When my students create a learning wall, they are empowered to find and create artifacts of their learning as well as decide on ways to present them visually.

The essence of a learning wall is connection. Recently, my students and I started creating our learning wall for our study of *Trevor Noah: Born a Crime* (Noah, 2019). The two guiding questions of our unit are:

- What are the effects of colonialism?
- How do writers craft their personal stories in interesting and meaningful ways?

Students connect through their collaboration as they discuss the answers to these questions, find artifacts that represent that learning, and make a plan for displaying them. They are making connections with Trevor Noah, making connections between English class and geography class, making connections between ideas to build a cohesive learning wall, and making connections with their peers' understanding of the text.

Conduct Conferences

My best routine for developing connections with individual students is through regular reading and writing conferences. Because students are telling their stories, arguing for their passions, and reading books they love, I learn so much about them through these check-ins.

But I also build connections as I share my own book recommendations or describe how I tackle a particular problem in my own writing. It is hard for teachers to find time to confer with students (my goal is to meet with each student at least once per week), but it is the most important thing I do for both differentiated learning and relationship-building. Carl Anderson's famous conferring question "How's it going?" is all I need to unlock a world of connection with a student (Anderson, 2000). This deceptively simple question communicates that I care about their work, and it cracks open the door for more personal conversations. Like Haydn running back to the conferring table just to chat, this question often opens up conversations that are completely unrelated to English class. Students have space to share about their stressful math test or awesome soccer game if that is what they need to do.

Conclusion

Almost four years since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are teaching students who, like my daughter, still carry pandemic go-bags in their backpack—literally and figuratively. Regardless of their specific loss, every person in our school building has experienced a loss, and sometimes trauma, that requires healing—a kind of loss that requires a different approach to the learning opportunities we have offered in the past.

COVID-19 wrested control away from all of us and pushed me to release some vestiges of control I was still holding onto in my classroom. The truth is that my pre-COVID-19 classroom was so content-driven that it sometimes forgot to be student-centered beyond the curriculum. Let's be honest: the kids learned a lot about reading and writing, but life after COVID-19 revealed that my class was not as safe and affirming as I thought it was. It was not as safe and affirming as I want it to be.

I have new priorities: predictability, flexibility, empowerment, connection (Venet, 2021, p. 67). These form my decision-making checklist. These guide all the English that happens between the bells because if these priorities are not met first, true learning is not likely to follow.

Today, the English strategies and skills we are learning together are no different than they were in March 2020. But the vibe (as my middle schoolers would say) has changed. It feels more open and more responsive and more inclusive. Today in room 124, learning and healing happen in tandem, working symbiotically to restore tiny pieces of what we have lost.

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