OTESSA
PROCEEDINGS

Yes, You Can: Research With Adult Trauma Survivors Who Learn Online

Hilary Schmidt (iD)
Open Learning
Thompson Rivers University

Correspondence:

Hilary Schmidt
Open Learning
Thompson Rivers University
Canada
Email: hschmidt [at] tru.ca

Abstract

Trauma-informed educational practices are rapidly gaining traction in higher education, with increasing interest from faculty and staff, administrators, and government policymakers. While the volume of scholarly publications in this area has increased over the past few years, literature on trauma-informed pedagogy and practice in higher education continues to consist primarily of practitioner reflections (Anderson et al., 2023). As far as I am aware, my own publications (Schmidt, 2023, 2024, 2025) comprise the first peer-reviewed research to examine trauma-informed practice for open/online higher education. Given survivors' preference for hybrid and online learning (Werkmeister, 2024), the relative lack of research in this area represents a troubling gap. Particularly concerning is the dearth of scholarly literature that centres survivors, contradicting the fundamental principle of collaboration in a trauma-informed approach.

Educational researchers who wish to address this gap through projects that centre survivors may encounter a variety of myths and barriers, however. Using SAMHSA's (2014) guidelines for trauma-informed practice, this article dispels myths, dismantles barriers, and provides practical guidance for implementing respectful, collaborative research relations with survivors, ensuring safety for researchers and participants, and attaining institutional research ethics board approval.

Keywords: trauma-informed, online learners, research practice, open learning, higher education, survivors

Introduction

Trauma-informed educational practices are rapidly gaining traction in higher education, with increasing interest from faculty and staff, administrators, and government policymakers (e.g., Government of British Columbia, 2023). Nonetheless, a significant gap in research persists, particularly in the postsecondary context, where practitioner reflections comprise the most commonly published form of literature (Anderson et al., 2023). The gap widens even further in the open and online postsecondary setting: although several recent peer-reviewed publications explore trauma-informed practice for online postsecondary education from a theoretical or practice-based perspective, empirical research and engagement with survivors in this context remain scant (Chan, 2022; Hitchcock et al., 2021; Moses et al., 2023; Sherwood et al., 2021). My own publications, as far as I am aware, represent the first published research to engage adult survivors who learn in the open/online context (Schmidt, 2023, 2024, 2025).

Further research to address this gap is urgently needed. More than half of postsecondary students report a life history of trauma, and at least 10% have experienced complex trauma, a distinct subset of trauma stemming from extremely threatening or horrific events that extend over time and from which escape is difficult or impossible (Cusack et al., 2019; Walters et al., 2024; Windle et al., 2018; World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). In open and online postsecondary settings—which are often described as improving access for underserved learners, including veterans, women, former youth in care, 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous persons, and refugees—the proportion of students with a life history of trauma may be substantially higher (Davidson, 2024; Giano et al., 2020; Koseoglu et al., 2020; Radford et al., 2021). Indeed, a recent study found that trauma severity strongly predicts student preference for online and blended learning (Werkmeister, 2024), and the survivors who participated in my research emphasized that open/online learning was the only postsecondary pathway open to them (Schmidt, 2023). As trauma reduces the odds of postsecondary graduation by as much as 56% (Hardcastle et al., 2018; Lecy & Osteen, 2022; Otero, 2021), open and online universities must ensure they are meeting traumatized learners' needs and not "recruit[ing] for failure" (Kelly & Mills, 2007, p. 150), placing survivors at risk of lifelong financial damage (Lockwood & Webber, 2023).

To meaningfully address this gap, educational researchers examining trauma-informed practice in open/online settings must engage with survivors, who are at present almost entirely missing from the literature (Herman, 2023; Schmidt, 2025). Trauma-informed practice implemented without adequate engagement with survivors—particularly survivors who have experienced the most severe forms of harm—not only violates the fundamental principle of collaboration within a trauma-informed approach but may also lead to intervention-generated inequality, a risk when interventions are inadvertently developed to be most inclusive of those facing least adversity (Edelman, 2023). In other words, neglecting the survivor perspective in trauma-informed educational practice for open and online postsecondary settings may cause significant harm.

Nonetheless, researchers who wish to engage with survivors are likely to encounter an array of myths and barriers. In this article, based on my completion of a study that engaged adult complex trauma survivors who learn online, I review and dismantle key myths and barriers and provide recommendations to implement a trauma-informed research approach, attain research ethics board approval, and engage safely and respectfully with survivors.

Myths and Barriers

I encountered four main myths and barriers as I wrote a research proposal and ethics application focused on understanding the experience and needs of adult complex trauma survivors who learn online. These included:

- "You won't get participants."
- "Survivors are too fragile to participate."
- "You won't pass research ethics board review."
- "You'll be (re)traumatized."

The other myth I encountered was that the gap itself—the lack of published research into trauma-informed practice for open and online higher education, and the lack of engagement with survivors—signalled that the topic itself was not worthy of investigation.

Each of these myths is briefly explored below.

"You Won't Get Participants"

When I embarked on my project, well-meaning members of the academy expressed doubt I would be able to recruit participants. In fact, I encountered quite the opposite problem: although I was looking for only 3 to 5 participants, I received 118 responses (89 qualified) within only 6 weeks of posting a recruitment message on the student portal of a Canadian open/online university. In other words, I had 20 to 30 times the number of qualified participants I needed, creating challenges around participant selection.

"Survivors Are Too Fragile to Participate"

The subtext to this statement is that participation in research related to trauma-informed practice is harmful to survivors. However, characterizing survivors as "too fragile" runs counter to the fundamentals of trauma-informed practice: it is stigmatizing and pathologizing and may itself cause harm. A major meta-analysis directly counters this myth: Jaffe et al. (2015) found that survivors are not harmed by participating in trauma research and find participating in trauma research a positive experience, in part because they believe they are helping other survivors.

"You Won't Pass Research Ethics Board Review"

In direct contradiction to this myth, my application passed ethics review, even though it was focused on engaging with complex trauma survivors, who have experienced some of the most severe forms of harm. In my submission, I highlighted the ways in which my research itself was trauma-informed and my plans to keep myself and my participants safe. Coupled with the evidence from Jaffe et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis, the research ethics board evidently found this persuasive enough to approve the project.

"You'll Be (Re)Traumatized"

Experiencing secondary trauma when engaging with survivors is absolutely a risk. However, it is not inevitable, even for researchers who are also survivors. From my perspective, the key is to recognize the potential for secondary trauma and put mechanisms in place to minimize the risk. I was deliberate in considering my supports, resources, and boundaries as I embarked on my project. One key element was to communicate to participants that the aim of the study was not

to explore their personal experience of trauma but to examine their experience of being an adult online learner with a complex trauma history.

"The Topic Is Not Worthy of Investigation"

Demonstrating the widespread incidence of trauma and its educational impacts can support others' understanding of why the topic is worthy of investigation. This was the approach I took, with a focus on bringing forward previous quantitative research, and I found this generally effective. It would certainly be challenging to argue that an issue affecting more than half our students that increases the risk of attrition by over 50% is not worthy of investigation.

Trauma-Informed Research Practice

Navigating past each of these myths and barriers, achieving research ethics board approval, and engaging respectfully with survivors involved implementing trauma-informed principles at every stage of my research project. Broadly speaking, trauma-informed research practice involves fully integrating knowledge about trauma into one's work and resisting re-traumatization of everyone involved in the project, including participants, fellow researchers, supervisors, and oneself (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). This can be achieved by respecting six principles:

- safety
- trustworthiness and transparency
- empowerment, voice, and choice
- collaboration and mutuality
- peer support
- cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014)

These principles can be integrated into all educational research, regardless of whether it is survivor- or trauma-focused. Because any research project will almost certainly include survivors as participants and/or researchers (whether the research team is aware of this or not), using a trauma-informed approach promotes inclusivity in research. This may be particularly important when the participants are adult open/online learners, given the indications that a substantial proportion of these learners carry a personal history of trauma.

Below, I describe my experience implementing the six principles with adult survivors of complex trauma who learn in an open/online postsecondary setting.

Safety

Everyone involved in a research project should be as safe as possible throughout. To achieve this, I included clear and specific content warnings within the informed consent, advising participants that the initial screening survey contained "questions about family dysfunction; physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect by parents or caregivers; peer violence; witnessing community violence, and exposure to collective violence" (Schmidt, 2023, p. 120). For those selected to participate in the interview/detailed questionnaire, I advised there were no questions about their personal experience of trauma and that I would "draw the conversation away from any disclosures" (Schmidt, 2023, p. 120). I reinforced the latter message in the preamble to the interview/detailed questionnaire, telling participants that "the aim of these questions is <u>not</u> to explore your experience of the trauma itself. You will not be asked about your

trauma history, and absolutely no disclosure is required" (Schmidt, 2023, p. 130). This minimized my risk of secondary trauma and reduced the likelihood that participants would become triggered.

In anticipation that some participants could be triggered by either the screening survey or the interview/detailed questionnaire, I provided links and phone numbers to 24-hour support services accessible to participants. I also prepared an evidence-informed protocol for synchronous interviews in case a participant became triggered (Schmidt, 2023).

The principle of safety also guided my approach to data management. Although in general I am committed to open practice, I chose not to make my data openly available, as doing so would have meant the participants would have no influence over how it was used and no opportunity to build trust with researchers who might use it. I also anticipated that open data could expose survivors to danger if there were any possibility they could be identified despite anonymization.

Trustworthiness and Transparency

I strived to establish trustworthiness and transparency throughout the project. One way in which I approached this was to use a non-pathologizing screening mechanism. Instead of screening for complex post-traumatic stress disorder, I used a validated tool (the Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire) that asks questions about experiences rather than identifying a potential pathology (Schmidt, 2023).

Another mechanism to establish trustworthiness and transparency was my deliberate use of humanizing language throughout the project. I avoided speaking about participants instrumentally, as well as using pathologizing, stigmatizing, objectifying, or dehumanizing language in my research proposal, ethics application, interactions with participants, and reporting of results.

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Empowerment, voice, and choice are crucial for survivors, who may have been systematically disempowered and silenced both during the original trauma and afterwards (Herman, 1997, 2023). In my own study, once selected, participants had a choice of engaging with a detailed questionnaire or an online synchronous interview. I explicitly guided them to answer only those questions they felt comfortable with and reminded them that they could stop at any time. I also invited them to provide artefacts to expand on their experience beyond the boundaries of my questions, and to review my drafts and provide feedback. I emphasized that they could freely choose whether to participate in these ways.

Highlighting survivors' voices in results is another way of engaging with this principle. Survivors' own words lie at the heart of my results, and I've titled both presentations and publications with direct quotes from participants (Schmidt, 2023, 2024, 2025).

Collaboration and Mutuality

Implementing the principle of collaboration and mutuality involves recognizing survivors as partners and as experts in navigating the impacts of trauma (Petrone & Stanton, 2021). Researchers focused on trauma-informed educational practice who are not engaging with survivors might ask themselves why and challenge themselves to consider how their projects

could potentially contribute to increased marginalization, stigmatization, objectification, or pathologization of survivors.

In my own research, I centred survivors throughout. My research question was designed to draw upon survivors' expertise by uncovering their experience and needs. I invited them to read my drafts (not just transcripts) and incorporated their feedback, ensuring they were aware of the changes I made as a result (Lindheim, 2022; Schmidt, 2023). I asked them what further research they believed needed to be done and what they felt was missing from standard trauma-informed practice. I took a deliberately relational stance in every interaction.

Peer Support

Given my research design, participants had no opportunity for peer support within the study. Nonetheless, peer support remained an essential element of my research practice. As I gathered data and wrote my results, I had informal biweekly meetings with peer researchers, and this was an important source of support. For researchers who are also survivors, connection with other researcher-survivors may provide invaluable support.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Acknowledging the impact of intersectionality and generational trauma and dismantling stereotypes and bias informed my selection of participants, as well as my research protocols. For example, I employed an updated version of the validated screening instrument, which had been redesigned to be more inclusive than the original (WHO, 2020). During the participant selection process, I invited participants from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds, civic statuses, and genders, as well as a wide range of ages (Schmidt, 2023).

Conclusion

Educational researchers who wish to contribute to the essential work of engaging with survivors in support of trauma-informed educational practice in open and online postsecondary settings should be undeterred by the myths and barriers they are likely to encounter. While there are undoubtedly risks and challenges, researchers can navigate past them through robust and thoughtful implementation of trauma-informed research practice.

Author's Contributions

HS is the sole author of this paper.

Open Researcher and Contributor Identifier (ORCID)

Hilary Schmidt ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3501-5240

Acknowledgements

Ethics Statement

This discussion of research practice did not require ethics review. For details regarding ethics review of my survivor-focused study, please see Schmidt (2023).

Conflict of Interest

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data availability does not apply to this article.

References

Anderson, R. K., Landy, B., & Sanchez, V. (2023). Trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education: Considerations for the future of research and practice. *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education*, *2*(2), 125–140. https://journals.library.appstate.edu/index.php/JTSE/article/view/212

Chan, A. B. (2022). Using andragogy for trauma-informed practice in online environments. *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education*, *1*(2), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.32674/jtse.v1i2.4831

Cusack, S. E., Hicks, T. A., Bourdon, J., Sheerin, C. M., Overstreet, C. M., Kendler, K. S., Dick, D. M., & Amstadter, A. B. (2019). Prevalence and predictors of PTSD among a college sample. *Journal of American College Health, 67*(2), 123–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1462824

Davidson, S. (2024). *Trauma- and resilience-informed practices for postsecondary education: A guide.* Education Northwest. https://educationnorthwest.org/resources/trauma-and-resilience-informed-practices-postsecondary-education-guide

Edelman, N. L. (2023). Trauma and resilience informed research principles and practice: A framework to improve the inclusion and experience of disadvantaged populations in health and social care research. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, *28*(1), 66–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/13558196221124740

Giano, Z., Wheeler, D. L., & Hubach, R. D. (2020). The frequencies and disparities of adverse childhood experiences in the U.S. *BMC Public Health*, *20*, Article 1327. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09411-z

Government of British Columbia. (2023, August 26). *B.C. post-secondary digital learning strategy.* https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/post-secondary-education/institution-resources-administration/digital-learning-strategy

Hardcastle, K., Bellis, M. A., Ford, K., Hughes, K., Garner, J., & Ramos Rodriguez, G. (2018). Measuring the relationships between adverse childhood experiences and educational and employment success in England and Wales: Findings from a retrospective study. *Public Health*, *165*, 106–116. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.09.014

Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror.* BasicBooks.

Herman, J. L. (2023). *Truth and repair: How trauma survivors envision justice.* BasicBooks.

Hitchcock, L. I., Báez, J. C., Sage, M., Marquart, M., Lewis, K., & Smyth, N. J. (2021). Social work educators' opportunities during COVID-19: A roadmap for trauma-informed teaching during crisis. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*(sup1), 82–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1935369

Jaffe, A. E., DiLillo, D., Hoffman, L., Haikalis, M., & Dykstra, R. E. (2015). Does it hurt to ask? A meta-analysis of participant reactions to trauma research. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *40*, 40–56. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2015.05.004

Kelly, P., & Mills, R. (2007). The ethical dimensions of learner support. *Open Learning, 22*(2)*,* 149–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510701306699

Koseoglu, S., Ozturk, T., Ucar, H., Karahan, E., & Bozkurt, A. (2020). 30 years of gender inequality and implications on curriculum design in open and distance learning. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, *2020*(1), Article 5. https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.553

Lecy, N., & Osteen, P. (2022). The effects of childhood trauma on college completion. *Research in Higher Education*, *63*(6), 1058–1072. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-022-09677-9

Lindheim, T. (2022). Participant validation: A strategy to strengthen the trustworthiness of your study and address ethical concerns. In G. Espedal, B. Jelstad Løvaas, S. Sirris, & A. Wæraas (Eds.), *Researching values: Methodological approaches for understanding values work in organisations and leadership* (pp. 225–239). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90769-3_13

Lockwood, J., & Webber, D. (2023, August 21). *Non-completion, student debt, and financial well-being: Evidence from the survey of household economics and decisionmaking*. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/non-completion-student-debt-and-financial-well-being-20230821.html

Moses, J. D., Bayne, H. B., & Moore, R. L. (2023). Guiding course development: Trauma-informed rubrics for asynchronous online learning environments. *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design*, *12*(2), 87–101. https://doi.org/10.59668/722.13025

Otero, C. (2021). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and timely bachelor's degree attainment. *Social Sciences*, *10*(2), Article 44. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10020044

Petrone, R., & Stanton, C. R. (2021). From producing to reducing trauma: A call for "trauma-informed" research(ers) to interrogate how schools harm students. *Educational Researcher, 50*(8), 537–545. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211014850

Radford, A., Toombs, E., Zugic, K., Boles, K., Lund, J., & Mushquash, C. J. (2021). Examining adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) within Indigenous populations: A systematic

review. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *15*(2), 401–421. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-021-00393-7

Schmidt, H. (2023). *Survivors of complex trauma as adult online learners: A case study* [Master's thesis, Athabasca University]. DTheses. http://hdl.handle.net/10791/423

Schmidt, H. (2024). Survivors of complex trauma as adult online learners. *OTESSA Conference Proceedings, 4*(1). https://doi.org/10.18357/otessac.2024.4.1.378

Schmidt, H. (2025). "I can do this!": Survivors of complex trauma as postsecondary open/online learners. *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education, 4*(2), 41–64. http://doi.org/10.70085/jtse.v4i2.234

Sherwood, D., VanDeusen, K., Weller, B., & Gladden, J. (2021). Teaching note—Teaching trauma content online during COVID-19: A trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*(sup1), 99–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1916665

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration. (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach* [HHS publication no. (SMA) 14-4884]. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/resource-guide/samhsa_trauma.pdf

Walters, A. J., Notebaert, L., Van Bockstaele, B., Meeten, F., Todd, J., & Clarke, P. J. F. (2024). Occurrence of potentially traumatic events, type, and severity in undergraduate students. *Australian Psychologist*, *60*(1), 43–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2024.2404983

Werkmeister, S. A. (2024). Investigating learning environment preferences in students with trauma history. *Journal of Educational Sciences & Psychology*, *14*(2), 251–266. https://doi.org/10.51865/JESP.2024.2.21

Windle, M., Haardörfer, R., Getachew, B., Shah, J., Payne, J., Pillai, D., & Berg, C. J. (2018). A multivariate analysis of adverse childhood experiences and health behaviors and outcomes among college students. *Journal of American College Health*, *66*(4), 246–251. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1431892

World Health Organization. (2020, January 28). *Adverse childhood experiences international questionnaire (ACE-IQ)*. https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/adverse-childhood-experiences-international-questionnaire-(ace-iq)

World Health Organization. (2025). 6B41 Complex post traumatic stress disorder. In *ICD-11 for mortality and morbidity statistics* (code 6B41). https://icd.who.int/browse/2025-01/mms/en#585833559