

***Building Resilience and Connection during the Pandemic: Using Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in the Teaching of Chinese and Italian Cultures Through Noodles***

Hong Li, Emory University, United States  
Christine Ristaino, Emory University, United States

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**Abstract**

The experience of trauma, both global and personal, may inhibit learning and decrease learner motivation. This year in particular our students have experienced a myriad of hardships, isolation, uncertainty, and fear. In this paper, we argue that teachers can help students overcome the challenges of trauma and inspire learning by building empowerment and resilience into their online teaching through techniques that balance rigor, support, structure, and flexibility, create a sense of safety, and humanize online learning. We will introduce the principles of trauma-informed pedagogy when addressing the societal challenges of COVID and share our course design and activities to illustrate how these principles may be implemented.

Keywords: Trauma-informed Pedagogy, Chinese Culture, Italian Culture, Food Studies

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## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the way we live our lives and how we teach and learn in higher education. By the time our students at Emory University enrolled in our course, *Noodle Narratives on the Silk Road: A Cultural Exploration of China and Italy*, in the summer of 2020, they, like many others around the world, had experienced a myriad of hardship, isolation, uncertainty, and fear, and found themselves adjusting to a new and more complex relationship with food and cooking. While some returned home early in the middle of the spring semester, and thus spent more time at the dinner table with family members, many international students had been stranded in the United States, and their meals often consisted of take-out orders from university cafeterias and local restaurants, microwavable boxes, or sometimes nameless culinary creations using the only ingredients they could manage to assemble from their cupboards. Consequently, when teaching this course under COVID conditions in the summers of 2020 and 2021, we had to make substantial changes to our course design and content so we could mitigate the impact of trauma and help our students learn. Utilizing trauma-informed pedagogy, we developed a framework for teaching and learning online in a trauma-informed way for the purpose of building resilience and connection. In this paper, we argue that teachers can help students overcome the challenges of trauma and inspire learning by building empowerment and resilience into their online teaching through techniques that balance rigor, support, structure, and flexibility, create a sense of safety, and humanize online learning.

### **I. Trauma-informed Pedagogy and Our Framework**

What does it mean to be trauma-informed? According to Carello and Butler, “to be *trauma-informed*, in any context, is to understand the ways in which violence, victimization, and other traumatic experiences may have impacted the lives of the individuals involved and to apply that understanding to the design of systems and provision of services so they accommodate trauma survivors’ needs and are consonant with healing and recovery.” (Carello & Butler, 2015) When planning our course, we turned to two sets of principles we consider fundamental in guiding our teaching during the pandemic. The first set involves the five principles for trauma-informed care, identified by Falloot and Harris in 2001. They are 1) ensuring safety, 2) establishing trustworthiness, 3) maximizing choice, 5) maximizing collaboration, and 5) prioritizing empowerment. Additionally, the eight Principles of Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning offer important guidelines for building and sustaining a classroom environment that is conducive to coping with trauma and maximizing learning. They are: 1) Physical, Emotional, Social, and Academic Safety, 2) Trustworthiness and Transparency, 3) Support and Connection, 4) Inclusiveness and Shared Purpose, 5) Collaboration and Mutuality, 6) Empowerment, Voice, and Choice, 7) Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues, and 8) Growth and Change.

Comparing these two sets of principles, we realized that most of what Falloot, Harris and Carello advise are things that make us more resilient, more connected, and more productive - something all of us want in our lives. How did we operationalize these principles in our classroom? First and foremost, we adjusted the course objectives to integrate trauma-informed teaching and learning principles. In addition to writing learning outcomes based on course content, we also aimed to acknowledge the impact of the pandemic on our students’ mental health and learning capacities, creating an environment that was conducive to building resilience and connection among our students.

We asked a set of key questions that facilitated the use of trauma-informed pedagogy. They are:

- 1) How do we create a structured, predictable, and flexible learning environment that fosters a sense of safety, respects each other's perspectives and experiences, and empowers our students to grow competence and confidence?
- 2) Where and how do we give students the opportunity to connect and collaborate with each other and their own communities?
- 3) What traits and behaviors should professors demonstrate in their teaching to minimize risk, nurture self-care, and foster connection?

The two sets of principles, the newly envisioned course goals, and the set of questions are the key components of our framework for trauma-informed teaching. They guided us in all domains of the course, including Canvas site design, syllabus, content and readings, assignments, policies, teaching methods, technologies, instructor behaviors, and teacher-student relationships.

## **II. Teaching Chinese and Italian Cultures through Food during the Pandemic – Our Considerations and Practices**

### **i. Inclusive Planning - Our Course, Its Canvas Site, and Syllabus**

Our course provides an interdisciplinary approach to food studies from a global perspective, comparing Italy, China, and the cultures represented and shared by our students. We teach it online every summer through Emory's Online Learning Consortium. Our course introduces students to the theoretical framework that looks at food, cooking practices, and cultural variations of shared ingredients as important and often undervalued vehicles of cultural memory and communal identification and cohesion. The histories and theories of food culture in China and Italy further place our examination of the noodle into specific discourses of food as symbols of cultures. The course then goes deep into the noodle's cultural significance to see how it has integrated itself into the literature, social context, class structure, and cultural DNA of China and Italy. The Silk Road not only provides a physical pathway that brings Italy and China together through Marco Polo, trade, silk, and food, but it also becomes a metaphor that connects Italy and China in their shared privileging of masculinist historical narratives.

When preparing the course for summer 2020 and 2021, we revisited the course materials for appropriateness under COVID conditions. Without forcing it, we made our teaching content relevant to the current COVID-19 crisis. We assigned articles and stories that examined the psychological impact of food, the importance of maintaining a balanced diet, or the human bond formed through food. We also expanded our discussions, both in and out of class, on the connections between adverse experiences, food choices, and physical/mental health, to help our students take care of their own wellbeing.

Recognizing that some students might feel anxious taking an intensive course online in the summer, we adopted a warm and motivating tone in our language for the syllabus and designed it in a clear, inclusive, and comprehensive manner. For example, the syllabus included built-in choices for students to complete assignments and participate in class. Students were given various ways to demonstrate their learning in addition to traditional high-stakes assignments. A detailed daily schedule allowed students to see how course content, learning objectives, and assignments aligned and supported one another. Additionally, a wide range of campus resources were listed to facilitate student success, including information for the Honor Code,

Office of Accessibility Services, the Writing Center, academic support from the Office of Undergraduate Education, Counseling and Psychological Services, and Testing and Learning Technologies.

Rather than distributing the syllabus on the first day of class, we made finalizing the syllabus a process of negotiation between us and our students to reduce their anxiety and apprehension about taking the course. We emailed the draft one week prior to the start of the semester to seek feedback from our students. We carefully considered their suggestions and concerns before finalizing it.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework used to optimize learning for all types of learners. Its principles call for multiple representations of content, multiple options for expression and control, and multiple means for engagement and motivation. (Blamires, 2003) Following the UDL principles, we designed our Canvas site in a way that acknowledges differences in learner backgrounds, motivations, and learning styles. First, to ensure easy access, key operational information about the course was presented repeatedly in various areas of the site, such as the homepage and welcome module, and in different modalities, including text, table, and announcements. Secondly, the site followed a consistent and predictable design, so students knew exactly where to find information and how to collaborate. For example, weekly modules all consisted of the same pages (workflow and schedule, readings, assignments, and class recordings). Understanding that we needed to be crystal clear about what students had to do to prepare for class, we provided a weekly workflow chart (figure 1) showing both asynchronous preparation and content for synchronous sessions. A table listing the specifics of synchronous sessions (figure 2) was added right below the workflow chart on Canvas. In addition, assignments were clearly indicated and hyperlinked in multiple areas on Canvas (such as the weekly assignment page and assignment module) to ensure easy access (figure 3) with a predictable due date time (11:59pm US daylight savings time). Lastly, readings were hyperlinked on two pages: the page for weekly workflow and schedule and the page for weekly readings. We believe the predictability, consistency, multiple means of presentation built into the Canvas site helped create a sense of trustworthiness and transparency and reduced psychological barriers for students.

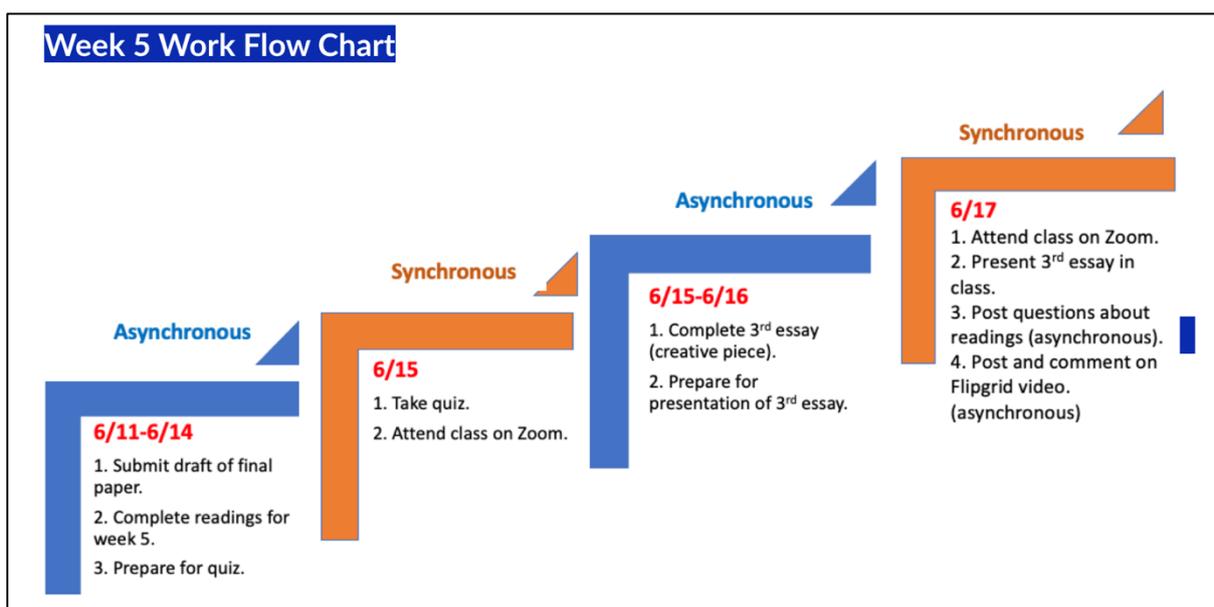


Figure 1: Workflow Chart for Week 5

Week 5 Synchronous Sessions	
Dates	Content
Tues. June 15	Noodles in Chinese and Italian literature and Memoirs Quiz on <a href="#">Shu Xi's Rhapsody on Pasta (including David Knechtges' Remarks preceding the poem)</a> . ↓ and <a href="#">From Scratch</a> ↓
Thur. June 17	Presentations of noodle poems/narratives based on the third essay assignment. <b>Present your imitation piece to class in 5-7 minutes, including the following:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read the poem or key part of your story,</li> <li>2. Explain what piece you chose to imitate and why,</li> <li>3. Explain what you learned about the culture of the original author through imitating his or her style,</li> <li>4. Explain what you learned about your own culture while writing.</li> </ol>

Figure 2: Schedule for Week 5

Week 2 Assignments		
<p>Week 2 Assignments</p> <p>All Assignments are due by 11:59pm, Eastern Daylight Savings Time (EDT)            If you are not in EDT, <a href="#">please click here to calculate your time zone.</a></p>		
Due Dates	Assignments	Submission
Mon, May 24	<a href="#">Reflective Essay #1</a> Comments are due on Thur, May 27	<a href="#">In this Discussion Board on Canvas.</a>
Mon, May 24	<a href="#">Post questions about readings on Chinese food.</a>	<a href="#">In this Discussion Board on Canvas.</a>
Wed, May 26	<a href="#">Post questions about readings on Italian food.</a>	<a href="#">On this Discussion Board on Canvas</a>
Thur, May 27	<a href="#">Post comments to your group members' reflective essays.</a> ----- <a href="#">Group project 1: Present and lead discussions</a> PPT slides due in folder on Google Drive	<a href="#">On this discussion board on Canvas</a> ----- <a href="#">Group Project 1 (Sec. 1 Group 1)</a> <a href="#">Group project 1 (Sec. 2 Group 1)</a>

Figure 3: Assignments for Week 2

## ii. Trauma-informed Teaching and Learning – Assignments and Policies

Students who enrolled in our class are diverse in many aspects. They came from many regions of the United States as well as countries such as China, South Korea, India, Saudi Arabia, and Peru, just to name a few. Together we have a community representing multiple traditions and experiences with food. Naturally, we tapped into this rich linguistic and cultural asset from our learners when designing learning activities, so students felt valued, connected to each other, and inspired by each other. In other words, our assignments were opportunities for students to reflect on and analyze their experiences with food while learning about the broader cultural and societal significance of food in Chinese and Italian contexts; and they could demonstrate their learning in varied ways and modalities.

First, we mixed low-stakes assignments with traditional high-stakes assignments. Low-stakes assignments included reflective essays based on readings, postings of questions about the readings, and icebreaker videos. Assigned early and frequently, they helped students keep up with the readings and reflect on their own experiences. Their reflective essays were posted on

the discussion board set up for small groups, so students could interact with their group members and bounce ideas off each other without worrying about their grades. Additionally, students were required to provide feedback to their group members' writings. According to Rusul Alrubail, "students benefit from peer feedback in that they are able to teach each other about the tasks... In seeing that their peer feedback is relevant, students will be more engaged and invested in working to complete the task successfully. Peer feedback also gives students an opportunity to have their voices heard and to listen to each other." (Abrubail, 2015) We also assigned icebreaker videos on Flipgrid (a simple video discussion website widely used in educational settings) throughout the semester on interesting topics, such as favorite dishes and travel plans. The videos were short (1-3 minutes) and light-hearted and fun, revealing interesting facts and the personalities of our students, and allowing us to grow to know each student at a much deeper level. In general, these low-stakes assignments proved to be an effective way to build connections among students and prepare them for high-stakes assignments, such as the mid-term project and final paper.

High-stakes assignments in our class constituted 75% of students' final grade. By the time students began working on their first high-stakes assignment, they had been given specific instructions on Canvas, had had the opportunity to ask questions during synchronous classes, and also had received feedback about their low-stakes assignments from their peers and professors. The first type of high-stakes assignment involved working together on a group project and preparing to lead class discussions. Following the idea of students teaching students, this assignment asked students to delve deeper into the course material and share their own insights. Using the questions posed by their peers, group members were responsible for guiding the entire class in the discussion of course materials. By placing students in the driver's seat, this assignment helped them feel more responsible for their own learning and gain a sense of agency and empowerment.

Secondly, we adopted a "plus-one" approach by simply adding alternative options to help students engage with the content in the way they preferred. For example, students could "speak up" during synchronous classes by talking, messaging in chatroom, or typing on shared Google docs. On the quizzes about readings, we included three extra questions for students to answer, allowing them to have three incorrect answers without penalty. For all writing assignments, students chose their own topics and areas of focus and we provided suggestions and feedback. We believe offering flexibility and options while maintaining course rigor is a crucial component of the trauma-informed classroom because it acknowledges learner autonomy, builds trust between teachers and students, and empowers students to learn in their own way.

One important way to build resilience is to create an environment in which one feels nurtured, connected, and trusted. We found the topic of our course, i.e., the histories and traditions of Chinese and Italian food, was a nourishing and comforting subject for our students during this challenging time. Consequently, we strove to provide multiple means for students to share their experiences and insights. Another type of high-stakes assessment involved our midterm project called *Pandemic Noodles*, an assignment and ultimately a website that shared from a multitude of perspectives what it means to make and cook noodles during a pandemic - from home, from abroad, without access to fresh food, without all the required ingredients. What would their noodle dishes look like during this new phase of life, one in which the whole world was a participant? Would our students modify noodle dishes just as our forebears had done during famine, drought, foreign invasions, pandemics, and journeys into new lands? What would the end results be? What would happen to our students, their socially distanced friends, their families, when they were asked to cook noodles for and with each other during a world-wide

event like no other? The results of our assignment were both expected and unexpected, benign and magic, simple and complex. Overwhelmingly, we discovered that making noodles connected our students with each other, with their families, with their friends, with the countries they studied, and with the countries they made them in.

With their written consent, we placed student essays and recipes on a website called *Pandemic Noodles*. Creating this website was an empowering experience for our students, since it allowed our students to become creators of content and knowledge, gave them a sense of pride, and connected them to the larger community outside our virtual class. Through this website, their work attracted media attention and has been featured in a number of publications, both nationally and internationally, such as the *AJC*, *SupChina*, *CNN*, and *VICE*.

### **iii. Humanizing Online Learning – We the Professors**

As expected, students who took our class in summer of 2020 were deeply affected by the global health crisis. During the six-week period of our class, some students or their family members and friends were diagnosed with COVID-19. Some international students couldn't return home because of travel bans, flight cancellations, visa issues, rising costs of plane tickets, censorship concerns, and various other personal reasons. Other students did choose to return home. They, too, were impacted. Some were placed into a hotel in isolation for a mandatory quarantine of 14 days. Of those who did go home, many were forced to wake at the earliest of hours to take classes, some in the middle of the night, because of time differences. For them, strangely enough, jet lag had yet to happen. In addition to all these challenges, they needed to adapt to the intensive nature of a summer class online. Under these unprecedented conditions, it was critically important for us as professors to demonstrate compassion and empathy, as well as be supportive and appreciative of our students. From the very beginning, we communicated to our students that we recognized the challenges of online learning during the pandemic, and that they could always count on our support. We did so repeatedly throughout the semester in different ways – in email check-ins, in synchronous Zoom sessions, in announcements on Canvas, through staying on Zoom after class to chat with students, etc. This type of communication happened genuinely and frequently, and our students took us up on our “offer” and felt comfortable reaching out to us when they struggled with personal issues or course materials.

Speaking honestly, no college student “signed up” to attend the so called “Zoom University”; however, one silver lining when it came to teaching online was that we interacted with students in their own surroundings – in their bedrooms, their cars, and accompanied by their favorite stuffed animals and pets. We were able to really see them, not just as students in a class, but as whole human beings in their own environments. This new setting offered us a tremendous opportunity to build rapport, and we embraced the idea of humanizing online teaching by building personal connections and engaging them as whole people. During every class, we utilized the first five minutes of our Zoom session to check in and connect. For instance, we asked our students about their dinners and sometimes we told them about the noodle dishes we had cooked with our families. We inquired about their current locations based on their Zoom backgrounds, which virtually took the class to residential areas in Saudi Arabia, a lake in Greece, a quarantine hotel in China, etc. We also allowed our students to leave briefly if they needed to let their dogs out or to grab a coffee or snack. These seemingly trivial gestures surprisingly had a rather significant impact on our students – they felt valued, supported, and were more prepared to stay on task and more willing to engage. One student wrote in the course evaluation, “both instructors were so friendly and accepting and inviting, it made class so much

fun and made waking up before 8am okay.” Another one commented, “The instructors were very enthusiastic and encouraged participation from everyone. I also feel like we had many different methods of learning the material (projects, writing, presentations, group work, quizzes, etc.), which helped me learn the material.”

As professors, we teach disciplinary knowledge and model human behaviors at the same time. To help our online summer students develop the ability to cope with challenges and adversities, we strove to promote behaviors of self-care by connecting our course content to self-care, and by disclosing aspects of our personal lives that were helpful to students. For example, some of our students struggled with mental health issues and experienced procrastination and difficulties with concentration. In addition to offering academic support and flexibility of deadlines, Dr. Ristaino shared with students that her children had been coping with similar conditions and she offered heartfelt encouragement and advice. When introducing food cultures in China and Italy, we included readings that explained the links between diet and health from diverse cultural perspectives. We engaged our students in in-depth discussions to explore principles of Chinese traditional medicine regarding the balance of Yin and Yang, cooling and heating food, the fan (starch foods, such as rice and noodles) and cai (vegetables and meats) principle, etc. Through group work and discussions, students also reflected on their own eating habits as college students and gained new ideas for improving their diets during the pandemic. The 90+ recipes on our website have inspired our students to try food from other cultures and cook healthier meals.

## **Conclusions**

After teaching this course twice during the pandemic and circling back to our original set of key questions, we asked ourselves: what did we learn from this experience and what are we going to keep from what we’ve learned? In addition, what will we leave behind and stop doing? We certainly look forward to meeting and interacting with our students face-to-face. We also miss our physical classrooms, where we can move freely and hand-write on a whiteboard attached to a real wall. In the meantime, however, teaching online has been a rewarding and educational experience for us both. Through utilizing the principles of Trauma-informed Teaching and Learning in our classes, we have developed a renewed consciousness and vigilant attention to the ways we can build connection and resilience among our students. The lessons we have learned and the insights we have gained will guide our teaching as we return to campus in the fall.

When creating a structured, predictable, and flexible learning environment that fosters a sense of safety and respect for each other, we realize we must balance course structure and rigor with built-in flexibility and options for students. All aspects of a course, from the syllabus and assignments to class pedagogy and policies, should be carefully planned, keeping in mind the goal of helping all students to succeed. Specifically, we can build a predictable routine into weekly course schedules and assignments to support both student learning and their mental health. More importantly, offering flexibility in deadlines and grading is not only a necessary practice during the pandemic, but also a demonstration of our trust in our students. Every person goes through difficulty in their lives, even when there isn’t a pandemic. We don’t always know when one of our students is going through a hard time, but we will continue to be flexible.

To provide students with the opportunity to connect and collaborate with each other and their own communities, we as professors should strive to provide multiple ways, both synchronously and asynchronously, for students to engage with the materials and demonstrate their learning.

Even when we return to in-person teaching, we will continue to build into our classes time to simply talk to our students, do check-ins frequently, and consistently offer encouragements and support. We also believe that mixing low-stakes and high-stakes assignments and giving students opportunities to co-construct knowledge through diverse learning activities will be effective ways of engaging students in in-person classes as well.

Regardless of course content and delivery platforms, we as professors should always aim to treat students with care, respect, and appreciation. By doing so, we can build rapport and trust between professors and students, which serves as a foundation for motivating students to learn.

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**Contact Emails:** [hli01@emory.edu](mailto:hli01@emory.edu)  
[craistai@emory.edu](mailto:craistai@emory.edu)