Red Deer College and Minister of Labour – Grant Agreement

Language Training Program – Reporting Documents

Project Title*: Using Trauma-Informed English as Second Language Instruction to Empower*

 *Refugees at CLB Levels 3 and 4*

Executive Summary

We are Red Deer College (RDC) and Central Alberta Refugee Effort (C.A.R.E.), partners who have worked well together for several years to offer English language training services to Central Alberta’s refugee residents. The purpose of our project was two-fold: to develop and deliver trauma-informed instructional skills for our target group of ESL instructors and to then rely on those instructors who used their new skills to deliver Alberta workplace knowledge and language skills to our second target group of learners at CLB Levels 3-4 in central Alberta.

This joint project was entitled *Using Trauma-Informed English as Second Language Instruction to Empower Refugees at CLB Levels 3-4.* Our objective was to instruct qualified ESL teachers in Trauma-Informed pedagogies and methodologies, thus providing them the tools to ensure successful retention of language skills for refugees who have experienced various levels and types of trauma before arriving to Alberta. We then tested our hypothesis that this group of ESL teachers would be better equipped to instruct workplace language skills to CLB levels 3-4 learners. In addition to instructing in the pilot offering of our *Alberta Workplace Language Certificate for Newcomers* courses, this group of trauma-informed ESL instructors also served as content experts in the development of our workplace language skills certificate. Our objective was to draw upon the newly developed skills for our targeted group of 8 ESL instructors who then relied on trauma-informed andragogy, along with simulations and scenarios in commercial environments, to instruct 18 students at CLB levels 3-4, thus (we anticipated) proving our hypothesis that this group of immigrants and refugees would transition more successfully into the workplace.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Background supporting material

The research into trauma and the effects it has on learners is broad as interest grows in this pedagogical field. The work of our instructors, learning designers and subject matter experts was informed by schools of thought influenced by leaders in trauma-informed pedagogy, including Peter Levine, Bessel van der Kolk, Bruce Perry, Charles Figley, and Gordon Neufeld.

Trauma-Informed Educator Certificate

Integration of Trauma-Informed Pedagogy into Curriculum Design

In addition to the research noted above, design was informed by Response to Intervention (RTi), which provides universal training for educators as they consider that all individuals may have a history of trauma. Rather than attempting to identify who has a trauma history that is presenting challenges to learning, it is suggested that there is a history for all and thus the educator responds with universal practices that provide more specific interventions as necessary and within the specific scope of practice. The focus on how to engage with learners was guided by the principles and domain of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA).

There was also exploration of the progression along the trauma continuum to support educators as they transition from being simply trauma-aware to trauma-informed. Progression along the continuum encourages the educator to embody trauma-informed practices rather than simply trying to apply strategies which may not seem as authentic to the learner.

The two courses that were developed for this certificate were:

Course 1: *Understanding Trauma and Promoting Resilience (15 hours)*

Course 2: *Trauma-Informed Principles; Teaching, Learning and Self-Care (15 hours)*

Key learnings for students

The 8 ESL instructors who achieved the certification recognized their skills acquisition as they moved through a “trauma-aware” to “trauma-sensitive” to “trauma-responsive” to a “trauma-informed” approach in the classroom. For example, some of the responses in their own words were:

*Before, I understood that an individual who experiences trauma relives the feelings of fear, helplessness and stress, but it did not occur to me at an intellectual level how memories of trauma would impact identity*; *after our first session I have realized that understanding trauma is not just about acquiring knowledge, it is about changing the way I view the world; I have realized that trauma can become an instructional barrier for me if I do not move from trauma-aware to trauma-informed approach in the classroom; I was surprised to find out that deeply traumatic experiences literally rearrange the brain’s wiring. In fact, the brain is changed to the point that you keep reacting to all kinds of situations that are neutral to other people, as if you are in danger; I found this session to be extremely eye opening in regards to the pervasiveness of trauma and how it impacts our immigrant and refugee population*; *I was stuck by the fact that many of my students, especially in my adult literacy classes experience significant absences…I brushed it off as possible underlying medical conditions or poor health or their susceptibility to new germs and diseases upon arriving in a new country. Through reading Van Der Kolk’s chapter from “The Body Keeps The Score”, I was struck with the realization that after trauma, as he puts it, the world is experienced with a different nervous system; it was interesting to note how the neurological effects of trauma effect so many of the parts of our brains (cerebral cortext, hippocampus, amygdala, etc.) and just how they are affected - being aware of how the brain works and what is happening in a learner’s body is crucial for me as I work in a place with people who have undergone trauma; too many are judged for their response to the trauma they have endured and not on the chaos the trauma has created around them. It goes back to understanding the meaning behind the behavior; I would like to look at each activity that I choose to bring into my classroom and examine it from a trauma-informed lens. I plan to implement some of the great activities gained from each session. Also, I’d like to share many of the SAMHSA’s principles with fellow colleagues...As I interact with both students and friends who have suffered trauma, I will be able to recognize ways that I can provide a place of safety and encourage a sense of relationship and competency;*

Other general observations included a new understanding that the neurological effects of trauma actually impact the nervous system, thus they were equipped to apply a trauma “lens” to classroom management. For example, instructors learned how the brain reacts to trauma, and specifics about how the brain’s reaction, along with other bodily considerations, impact the ability to acquire new learning. They also learned that trauma is not simply an “event,” but rather that it leaves a lasting imprint on the mind, brain and body. They explored the phases of trauma as they specifically apply to refugees from war and catastrophe-impacted communities, and they acquired new knowledge about the varied cultural perceptions of trauma.

What would the instructor/learning designer do differently?

*Considering the growth in the field of trauma studies, it should be noted that this certificate is an introduction to the foundations. As indicated by the trauma continuum, this is a journey for educators which requires an investment of time, exploration, curiosity and application. This certificate begins the process of exploring trauma-informed practices from the perspective of the educator and ends by briefly introducing how to advocate for organizational change and interdisciplinary teams to support learners as effectively as possible.*

Alberta Workplace Language Skills Certificate

Integration of Trauma-Informed Pedagogy into Curriculum Design

Two key elements of trauma-informed pedagogy that the instructor/course designer noted learning from the *Trauma-Informed Educator’s Certificate* that was then adapted into the *Alberta Workplace Language Certificate* were the concept of self-regulation and the incorporation of movement into learning activities.

In order to incorporate self-regulation, the instructor/course designer created specific worksheets that were used in each lesson throughout the three modules of the course. Examples include zone of regulation worksheets that invited students to identify their emotional state, while the trauma-informed instructor provided guidance through specific activities designed to regulate their emotions. Each module included a progression of invitations as student confidence grew through workplace scenarios. The worksheets and activities allowed students to assess their emotional state before and after the scenarios. Movement and time for reflection was incorporated into the language learning modules as a way to further demonstrate to the student the value of self-regulation tools. Role-playing allowed students to explore body language and levels of comfort in various workplace scenarios. Student confidence and comfort improved noticeably as they progressed through the workplace scenarios, resulting in strong acquisition of Alberta workplace language skills.

Most importantly, the instructor/course designer made a conscious effort to request assurance and permission from all students in order to ensure that they were comfortable with the class activities.

The three courses that were developed for this certificate were:

Course 1: *Safety Procedures in Alberta’s Commercial Environments (30 hours)*

Course 2: *Job-Specific Language in High Demand Service Sectors (15 hours)*

Course 3: *Customer Service Language Skills for Newcomers to Alberta Workplaces (15 hours)*

Key learnings for students

A summary of new knowledge for graduates of the *Alberta Workplace Language Skills Certificate* is more challenging to compile in the short term, given the nature of trauma and the new English language skills of participants. However, we worked with C.A.R.E. to translate questionnaires into several languages in order to solicit student responses. Some comments speak to the feeling of safety and cooperation in the classroom, that students appreciated the opportunity to compare Alberta workplaces with those in their country of origin, their renewed confidence as they challenged industry certifications such as WHMIS, and their acknowledgement of benefitting from the dynamic and conversational instructional style. Our partner, C.A.R.E. is encouraged by the new skills for both their instructors and the possibilities for the new Canadians that they serve.

What would the instructor/learning designer do differently?

*The first two modules were quite ambitious. There was an enormous amount of material to cover. As a result, the students did not feel prepared for the writing assessment in the first module, and the writing assessment in the second module was not complete. Future offerings will incorporate a writing activity into each lesson leading up to the assessment.*

Moving Forward

We believe that the development of these two certificates was a unique opportunity that was made possible only because of the funding support from the Settlement and Language Program. The program generated enthusiasm in the ESL community in central Alberta, and the feedback from students, instructors and our partner Central Alberta Refugee Effort supports our conclusion that the students who participated in the two pilot programs learned some important and life-long skills that will facilitate workplace attachment.