

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VICARIOUS TRAUMA INSTRUCTOR TOOLKIT

Bow Valley College
Calgary, Alberta
Delivered across Canada

Area of Practice:

- Promoting Physical and Mental Health
- Language Services

Video:

https://youtu.be/p0D_XLhbbVo

A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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PATHWAYS TO
PROSPERITY
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



VOIES VERS LA
PROSPÉRITÉ
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BACKGROUND ON THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPETUS FOR THE PROGRAM

Bow Valley College is the largest college in the Calgary region, with over 15,000 learners in 2023. The college offers programs that prepare graduates for in-demand careers in business, health care, technology, social services, entertainment arts, and more. Bow Valley College is recognized for its innovation and impact – it is one of Alberta’s Top 80 Employers and ranks among Canada’s Top 50 research colleges. Its applied research focuses on areas such as health and health technology, educational technology, and social innovation.

The *Vicarious Trauma in the Classroom: Exploring Language Instructor Experiences* project was initiated by Bow Valley College in response to concerns raised by English language instructors working with newcomers and refugees. Instructors were seeking resources to implement trauma-informed practices in their classrooms and, at the same time, were reporting negative impacts on their own well-being due to repeated exposure to learners’ trauma disclosures. When existing resources were reviewed, most were found to focus on K–12 education or clinical professions such as social work or psychology; none reflected the realities of adult language instruction in the settlement sector. In addition, several key gaps in the research literature were identified, including limited studies on vicarious trauma among instructors, a lack of evidence on coping strategies in educational contexts, and little guidance for institutions. This prompted Bow Valley College to pursue an applied research project to address these gaps and respond to the needs of instructors in the field. The result was a three-year applied research initiative, funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), which led to the development of the *Understanding and Preventing Vicarious Trauma Instructor Toolkit*.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

Understanding and Preventing Vicarious Trauma Instructor Toolkit

Description:

The Understanding and Preventing Vicarious Trauma Instructor Toolkit is an online, self-directed, evidence-based resource designed for English language instructors, particularly those working in the settlement sector. It supports instructors in delivering trauma-informed language classes while also addressing the mental wellness needs of instructors themselves.

The interactive toolkit introduces the concepts of vicarious trauma, burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious resilience, and explores how these experiences may arise when teaching learners who have experienced trauma. It offers practical strategies for trauma-informed teaching, tips for maintaining healthy boundaries, and tools to help instructors connect learners with appropriate community supports. The toolkit takes approximately 8 to 10 hours to complete and is structured into the following five modules:

1. *Introduction to Vicarious Trauma* – This module defines vicarious trauma and distinguishes it from compassion fatigue, burnout, and compassion satisfaction. It explores how vicarious trauma can show up in the workplace, how to recognize it, and strategies to reduce its impact.

2. *Trauma-Informed Approaches* – This module introduces the Four Rs of trauma-informed practice – Realize, Recognize, Respond, and Resist – and explains how to apply them in the classroom. It covers the six principles of trauma-informed practice and common trauma-informed strategies for teaching.
3. *In the Classroom* – This module focuses on applying trauma-informed approaches in real classroom settings. It covers strategies for setting classroom boundaries, preparing for class, responding to trauma disclosures, and returning to instruction after a difficult moment.
4. *Promoting Instructor Wellness* – This module offers wellness strategies for instructors for inside and outside the classroom. It discusses ways to build personal and professional support networks and how to set and maintain healthy boundaries.
5. *Supports for Students and Instructors* – This module provides guidance on identifying and using institutional and community resources. It includes tools to help instructors refer students to appropriate services and templates for building localized resource lists.

Goal(s):

The toolkit was developed with three interconnected goals. First, it aims to strengthen the capacity of both instructors and organizations to recognize and respond to vicarious trauma. This includes promoting instructor well-being and supporting the implementation of trauma-informed teaching practices. Second, it helps instructors adopt strategies that better support learners who have experienced trauma, contributing to safer, more inclusive classrooms and improved outcomes for English language learners. Third, it contributes to the broader knowledge base in this area, providing evidence and insights that can inform future program design, professional development, and capacity-building across the settlement and language training sectors.

Target Client Group(s):

The primary target client group is English language instructors, especially those working in LINC programs and with learners who have experienced trauma. The toolkit is also relevant to other instructors and educators in the settlement sector who support newcomer populations.

Delivery Partners:

The project was developed and delivered in collaboration with several key partners: Dr. Patricia Kostouros from Mount Royal University served as the subject matter expert, bringing academic expertise in trauma to guide the research and content development of the toolkit. The Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association (CIWA) was a core project partner, contributing throughout the research, development, and piloting phases. National pilot partners included Vancouver Community College, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS), TESL Ontario, and NorQuest College, who supported participant recruitment, piloting, and feedback collection during the final phase of the project.

Human Resources:

The project was led by a core team that included a project lead, project manager, principal investigator, research officer and language instructor. Several research assistants and an external developmental evaluator supported the work throughout. A subject matter expert in trauma contributed to the research and toolkit development, ensuring alignment with best practices. A partner advisor from the settlement sector provided additional guidance. The project also engaged

two co-creation teams – one composed of English language instructors and the other of language learners, with six participants in each group.

Funding:

The project was funded by Immigration Refugees Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

The toolkit was developed using a thoughtful, step-by-step process. It began with 53 interviews with English language instructors, program coordinators, and trauma experts from across Canada. These findings informed the next stage, where two co-creation teams – one of instructors and one of learners – worked closely with the project team to shape the content and structure of the toolkit. A subject matter expert in trauma reviewed the materials to ensure they reflected current research and best practices. The toolkit was then piloted in two phases, first locally and then across the country, with instructors from a range of teaching contexts. This progression from data collection to co-creation to piloting helped ensure that the toolkit is practical, relevant, and grounded in both research and real-world experience.

Efficient:

The toolkit was designed to be clear, practical, and easy to use. Instructors who took part in the research and piloting shared that they had limited time and were often working at full capacity. Based on this feedback, the team focused on the most important content and kept the full toolkit to 8 to 10 hours. It is available online and comes with a printable workbook to make access easier. Short activities are included to help users reflect and apply what they learn.

Relevant:

The toolkit was developed to meet a clear gap in the settlement sector. Many English language instructors work with learners who have experienced trauma, but most instructors have not received training on how to recognize or respond to it in the classroom. Instructors also often have limited time for professional development. In response, the toolkit was designed to be practical, accessible, and informed by real-world classroom experiences.

Sustainable:

The toolkit's format supports long-term sustainability. As an online, self-directed resource, it can be delivered without significant cost, making it easy to maintain and scale. A comprehensive PDF workbook increases accessibility and allows users to revisit the content as needed.

Transferable:

The toolkit was designed to be used across Canada. It was piloted nationally with instructors in a range of teaching settings, from urban to rural, to ensure broad relevance. Templates are included to help users map local supports, making the toolkit flexible for different regional contexts. Because it is delivered online and supported by a printable workbook, it can be accessed from anywhere with minimal technology requirements. While many instructors benefit from the flexibility of a self-paced format, the content can bring up emotionally complex topics and may be more impactful when

explored in a group setting. Some users may also prefer more structure and guidance. Therefore, the toolkit could also be delivered in a facilitated version. Furthermore, while the toolkit was created for English language instructors, its core content could be adapted for other client-facing roles, such as settlement workers.

During the research and pilot phases, it became clear that the responsibility of addressing vicarious trauma should not fall on instructors alone. This insight led to the recognition that the toolkit could be adapted for broader organizational use. With appropriate modifications, it could support trauma-informed approaches among supervisors, program coordinators, and decision-makers – those involved in areas such as scheduling, administrative workload, and policy development. In this way, the toolkit could help organizations apply trauma-informed thinking across multiple levels.

Organizations interested in adapting or developing a similar resource are advised to form strong partnerships, work with a skilled and flexible team, dedicate time for research, co-creation and piloting, and ensure sustainable funding to support each stage of the process.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

This project combined applied research, co-creation, and developmental evaluation to create a toolkit grounded in real classroom experiences. It began with over 50 interviews with instructors, coordinators, and trauma experts across Canada, providing a strong foundation for its development. Throughout the process, it prioritized the perspectives of English language instructors and learners, integrating their voices at every stage to ensure the toolkit reflects their day-to-day realities.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

This toolkit fills a gap that other resources have not addressed. Existing trauma-informed training tends to focus on K–12 education or on other professions such as social workers, psychologists, interpreters, or counselors. Few materials speak directly to the realities of adult English language instructors working in the settlement sector. This toolkit was designed specifically for that context and includes strategies not only for supporting learners, but also for helping instructors protect their own mental well-being.

High Client Uptake:

The project engaged 127 pilot participants from across Canada, with support from national partners who helped recruit instructors from diverse teaching contexts. Since then, interest in the toolkit has remained strong, with continued uptake through local and national presentations, workshops, and word-of-mouth. Former pilot participants have also reached out with requests to share the toolkit or to invite the team to deliver related professional development sessions.

High Client Retention:

The toolkit's focused content and accessible structure helped participants stay engaged and complete the training. Among participants in the two pilots, 84.7% completed all the modules of the toolkit. Retention was highest when participants had institutional support or were completing the toolkit with colleagues.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

The toolkit was piloted with 127 participants through local and national cohorts, and results showed strong positive outcomes. Quantitative data indicated that 94.3% of participants agreed the toolkit increased their interest in trauma, vicarious trauma, and trauma-informed practice (TIP). A total of 97.7% agreed that what they learned was important, and 92% felt more confident using TIP in the classroom. In addition, 96.5% reported being able to identify environmental, behavioural, and pedagogical triggers in the classroom and how to address them. Another 92% agreed the toolkit helped them develop new professional skills, and 94.2% said they would recommend it to other instructors. To assess knowledge gained, participants completed pre- and post-tests. In both the local and national pilots, there was a statistically significant improvement in scores, showing that knowledge of the content increased after completing the course.

Qualitative findings from focus groups further supported the value of the toolkit. Participants described it as relevant and useful, and noted that it supported reflection, deepened their understanding, and validated their professional experiences. They also reported greater awareness of professional boundaries and a clearer sense of their instructional role. Many also described changes they had made in practice, such as adapting teaching materials to be more trauma-informed and initiating conversations with colleagues and supervisors about emotional well-being and trauma in the classroom. Some reported feeling more confident speaking about these issues in their institutions and better able to offer and receive support. In addition, many instructors expressed that they had not previously reflected on the emotional toll of their work or realized how common these experiences were among their peers. Several noted that the process of engaging with the toolkit helped them name what they were feeling, recognize the impacts of vicarious trauma, and understand that they were not alone in these challenges.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

The project used a developmental evaluation (DE) approach, with an external evaluator embedded throughout the process. This approach supported continuous reflection and adaptation, allowing feedback gathered during implementation to directly inform the development of the toolkit.

The evaluation built on a strong research foundation. In the first phase of the project, 53 interviews were conducted with English language instructors, program coordinators, and trauma experts across Canada. These interviews identified key challenges and needs in the field and shaped the content and focus of the toolkit. During the pilot phases, additional data were gathered through pre- and post-surveys and focus groups. The evaluation framework was guided by principles from the Centre for Disease Control framework for assessing professional development and focused on four levels of change: participants' reactions (satisfaction and perceived relevance), awareness and understanding (knowledge gained), learning (how new insights were applied to their role), and behavior (intended or actual changes in practice). Data were both quantitative and qualitative, including standardized measures and open-ended feedback.

Insights from the first pilot were used to improve the toolkit before the national pilot. For example, participants asked for easier access to the material, which led to the creation of a printable workbook. The evaluation also highlighted the importance of institutional support – such as time allowances or

compensation – to enable instructors to fully engage with the material. These findings helped shape the final version of the toolkit.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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