

ASVET Workshop: 9th May 2019

Building Resilience through Trauma Informed Practice

By Beau Bardenhagen

The process of seeking asylum can be a traumatic experience. On top of making a dangerous journey to safety, people seeking asylum often face difficulties finding employment and accessing education and other basic humanitarian needs.

This trauma can also impact the ability of people seeking asylum in learning new skills.

It was in this context that ASRC ASVET program hosted the successful 'Building Resilience Through Trauma Informed Practice' workshop at RMIT University Melbourne in May 2019. Over 50 managers, Program co-ordinators, teachers, and administrators heard international guest presenters from the US, Dr Kirke Olson and Dr Sher Kamman, present on ground-breaking techniques to help students with trauma in their classrooms and programs.

Dr Kirke Olson and Dr Sher Kamman, on behalf of the ISS Institute and the Victorian Department of Education and Training, spoke of the impacts trauma can have in the classroom. Dr Olson, who is a co-founder of the Positivity Company, spoke of his experiences as both a classroom teacher and a psychologist. He shared strategies he has implemented in classrooms to help students manage the effects of their trauma.

Dr Kamman said that triggers for students who have experienced trauma can be any number of things; from overt reminders of a traumatic situation, to what may seem like a minor detail of everyday life, and anything in between.

"It's not necessarily the event that is traumatic. What is a traumatic experience for one person may not be traumatic for another person. It is the impact of the event to the individual that is traumatic," she said.

Dr Olson spoke about what that event may look like for someone who is having a traumatic flashback.

"People who have experienced a war zone are suddenly in a war zone in a classroom. It might look like an overreaction, but they are experiencing emotions from the past, in the present,"



Dr Kirke Olson

Dr Olson also said that this makes learning difficult for students who have experienced trauma. "The person you are trying to teach has their focus on a past memory in the present. We have to help them calm back down."

Both Dr Olson and Dr Kamman talked about strategies that teachers could use. This includes working with students to identify what techniques they use to calm themselves down if

they are in a state of stress and then working to apply these techniques in the future before the student gets too overwhelmed.

Dr Olson also described developing a culture in classrooms where students are free to describe how they are feeling. He said it is important to give students time before class to calm themselves down if they are feeling stressed.

Dr Kamman spoke of practical actions that teachers and co-ordinators can use to prevent potentially triggering students that have experienced trauma.

"Use a gentle, soft voice. Be mindful of facial expressions that may seem aggressive. Ask your students if there is anything you can do to make them feel more comfortable. Asking questions that give control to the student to make decisions can help too,"

The ASRC's Innovation Hub Director, Abiola Ajetomobi, thanked Dr Olson and Dr Kamman for speaking at the workshop.

Trauma-informed practice is important for people in inter-generational displacement. We are still learning. We really appreciate you both attending," she said.

The ASRC also announced the continuation of the ASVET program until 2021 after establishing and setting the groundwork for the

program to be successful over the past two years. The program helps people seeking asylum on BVEs, TPVs and SHEVs enrol in TAFE programs to help them develop skills for work.

"This is active humanitarianism," said Gill Meek, ASRC's Education Program Manager.

"This program helps people in a practical way. We have also created connections in regional areas where practitioners don't have as much support."

The workshop was a valuable experience for all participants.

"It is good to have these forum discussions. They always give a practical look at what is happening on the ground. Cuts to SRSS have had a big impact. After the withdrawal of significant SRSS support for many asylum seekers, we have had to adjust to this new reality. More people are falling into destitution... This means we are referring more and more people seeking asylum to TAFE providers so they can gain skills for employment," one ASRC volunteer said.

Gill Meek also took the opportunity to thank the volunteers who contribute to the program.

"Without these people we can't run this program. I am proud and privileged to work with them," she said.

