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Compassion in higher education: fashion or future for relational pedagogies?

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ABSTRACT

This comment paper offers critical reflections on compassion as a core concern in contemporary higher education, positioned in the context of hybrid and relational pedagogies. The pernicious effects of neoliberal ideology and policy upon academic teaching practices and students' learning experiences have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper problematises the concept and role of compassion in higher education to highlight the risk of it becoming a 'buzzword' or fashionable 'flavour of the month' solution that fails to adequately address underlying systemic problems. It challenges the discourse of compassion and associated language of suffering when applied to students and reveals the 'underside of compassion' as a mode of power. Conversely, from the perspective of academic staff, this paper draws attention to research undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic which shows that staff suffering needs to be acknowledged, voiced and heard. It advocates against overly simplistic and uncritically positive approaches to addressing the paradoxical nature of compassion in higher education. This paper concludes by arguing that cultivating critically compassionate learning cultures and campuses will: (a) enable relational pedagogies to thrive and (b) support the development of a more diverse, equitable and inclusive future for higher education.

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Introduction

The need for compassion as an antidote to neoliberal policies in higher education has been growing steadily (Houlbrook, 2022; Killam, 2023; Pedersen, 2021) and further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Denney, 2023; Elkington et al., 2024; Velez-Cruz & Holstun, 2022). When education is framed primarily as a commodity, the emphasis shifts towards instrumental skills and vocational training, neglecting the broader development of well-rounded individuals and citizens. Inevitably neoliberalism has left little room for the development of compassionate pedagogy, but the landscape is

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changing. Compassion is now rightly seen as a core concern and organising principle which should be at the centre of the university mission as an ethical academy (Gibbs, 2017; Tesar et al., 2023). This comment paper problematises compassion in higher education to highlight the risk of it becoming a ‘buzzword’ or fashionable term in pedagogical and management policies and practices. It aims to provoke fresh insights by interrogating the discourse of compassion and associated terms like suffering and pity in a contemporary higher education context where hybrid pedagogy is now the new norm. Hybrid pedagogy requires ‘designing for care’ which is about:

Creating, crafting, and teaching our online courses (and all of our courses increasingly mediated by technology) in the international narrative of a shared humanity ... It’s not just being compassionate towards our learners. Being kind to our learners is great, but designing for care is the intentional framing of course design and teaching through a structure that demonstrates care towards all those involved. (Quinn, 2022, p. xii)

The expansion of compassion into the literature around hybrid learning spaces means that this scholarly space could potentially become quite crowded in the future. We hope this paper will inspire readers to re-evaluate existing understandings of compassion and explore new ways of thinking and talking about compassion in higher education.

The language of compassion

In the academic literature, compassion is defined theoretically as a four-part social process: (i) noting suffering; (ii) interpreting suffering in particular ways; (iii) feeling empathic concern in response to suffering and (iv) acting to address/alleviate it (Worline & Dutton, 2022). Pietroni (2021, p. 206, emphasis added) argues that compassion needs to be re-considered, re-evaluated, and integrated into the understanding and practices of society more broadly as follows:

- A primary value and requirement in a modern world that, at individual, social, institutional and political levels, *frequently fosters its opposite* – to the extent that fear of annihilation, of valued social institutions, of groups and of the self – is widespread.
- Treating the other(s) with the same concern, attention and generosity that one would wish for oneself; refraining from treating them as one would not wish for oneself, being open to, disturbed by, sympathetic to, and moved to respond to the experience and pain of others.

Treating others as one wishes to be treated features in all major world religions, signifying that compassion is a fundamental human value. Suffering is a widespread aspect of the human condition. Everyone in one way or another must contend with grief, loss, and threats to physical and psychological wellbeing. Trauma-informed pedagogy is critical to ensure higher education practices and structures can support the wellness and academic success of students who suffer/have suffered from effects of traumatic experiences (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). Experiences of trauma-related suffering should never be ignored/minimised and always met with compassion.

While there is great value in responding to trauma-related suffering with compassion, more broadly this is not entirely unproblematic. As Kanov (2021) argues, if suffering is preventable, ‘then instances of *compassion may actually play a role in enabling further*

suffering to the extent that the compassion addresses symptoms (i.e., suffering) but not root causes' (p. 88, emphasis added). Addressing the symptoms of suffering with compassion as a 'sticking plaster' is unhelpful, and the reason why the discourse and language of compassion in relation to students needs challenging.

Challenging the language of compassion

In higher education, where the pursuit of knowledge and personal growth should converge, fostering compassion among students and staff is crucial. The term 'suffering' has been used to describe the challenges and difficulties faced by students (Zembylas, 2017). While the intention may be to acknowledge and empathise with students' experiences, the term can inadvertently reinforce a victim mentality. By framing students as individuals who are suffering, this risks perpetuating a narrative of helplessness and dependency, undermining agency and potential for growth. Using terms like suffering and pity, the language of compassion can perpetuate hierarchical power dynamics, reinforce stereotypes and hinder genuine understanding. It is essential to examine the implications of using such language, to reshape it in a way that promotes inclusivity, empowerment and equity. We need to see compassion through students' eyes.

Seeing compassion through students' eyes

Seeing compassion from a student's perspective encompasses understanding, empathy, support and a genuine concern for their wellbeing. Compassion can manifest in various forms, such as supportive interactions, timely responses to a student's email, easy access to resources and services, and the creation of inclusive and enabling learning environments. For some students, compassion may mean having their suffering acknowledged and validated, which can foster a sense of belonging and understanding. Recognising and empathising with their challenges can create an environment where students feel comfortable seeking help and support. However while some students may find comfort in having their struggles acknowledged and validated, others may prefer this to be seen through a lens of resilience and empowerment rather than victimhood. Students may not want to be defined by their hardships but instead be seen as multifaceted individuals capable of growth and overcoming challenges. It is essential to recognise the diversity of student experiences and the complex ways in which they relate to suffering and compassion.

Chio et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis indicates that compassion can help students face, and bounce back from, adversity, leading to a greater sense of thriving and meaning in life. This is the positive side of compassion – compassion as a virtue which embodies genuine care, concern and appropriate action. But there is also an underside to compassion that needs to be revealed and reflected upon.

The underside of compassion

Universities are a microcosm of society, and compassion features large in the language of global politics, 'hailed as both the key democratic virtue and *condemned as politically toxic*' (Ure & Frost, 2014, p. 2, emphasis added). Universities are higher education organisations whose working practices can be understood from the theoretical perspective of

organisational compassion. Simpson et al. (2014) argue that a little deviance from conforming with this 'trend' may be in order, because '*compassion is not invariably positive nor is it the universal good it is often presumed to be*' (p. 356, emphasis added). There are important questions that need to be asked such as: What are the motivations behind compassionate policies and practices? Who benefits? What are the power dynamics, effects and outcomes? We also need to consider carefully how organisational compassion enables individuals (students and staff alike) to identify how, where and when compassion becomes misplaced and/or inappropriate.

Compassion must be real. That is, not motivated by metrics, excellence frameworks and charter mark/award certificates to hang in the vice chancellor's office. There also needs to be congruence between espoused and enacted/experienced compassion-related strategies and policies. Institutional commitment to compassion must be more than surface-level impression management. We need to be wary of 'conspicuous compassion' at individual and institutional levels, which involves ostentatious public displays via corporate communication, social media, email signatures and so on. Rather than this being genuinely felt care and concern, conspicuous compassion is more about virtue signalling to show other people what a compassionate institution/individual *you* are.

Jackson et al. (2022, p. 1) illustrate how 'wellbeing washing' can be used as part of an organisational branding to project something positive and/or minimise and manage reputational risk. Universities must guard against this and prevent/stop uncritical use of compassion creeping into conversations and policies, simply to make something unpleasant less difficult to accept/deal with. Compassion is not something that can be commodified; it cannot be 'bolted on' to the curriculum and/or used as a checklist and pasted over existing modules/courses/programmes. As Killam (2023) and Houlbrook (2022) argue, compassion should be a platform for disrupting and resisting neoliberal ideology and advancing social justice. Creating meaningful interpersonal relationships within learning and teaching is also crucial to counterbalance an uncaring higher education system (Bovill, 2020; Gravett et al., 2024). This leads us to consider the role of *critical compassion* in the future landscape and learning spaces of relational pedagogies.

Critical compassion

Critical compassion addresses the underside and problematic aspects of compassion to move towards a politics of compassion that promotes an understanding of structural conditions of inequality and injustice. Critical compassion mitigates against a drift towards compassion as a 'buzz word' or fashionable 'flavour of the month' solution that fails to address deep rooted systemic problems. Critical compassion also involves courage to speak up and speak out about failures of compassion. This is illustrated in Elkington et al.'s (2024) collaborative autoethnographic study of large-scale assessment change during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Their autoethnography 'surfaced our concerns about care and the need for us as individuals to be aware of the need for compassionate practices' (p. 849). Similarly, Denney's (2023) research found that formal compassionate policies and practices to support students during the pandemic had a detrimental impact on staff struggling to cope with the transition to online teaching and assessment. Surfacing concerns about care and compassion involves 'breaking the silence' about staff workloads, wellbeing, stress and suffering.

Breaking the silence

Worline and Dutton (2022) draw attention to the academic stress and suffering involved in teaching *with* compassion, and while their work is located in the field of management teaching it has wider relevance. They argue that ‘speaking the unspoken’ brings staff suffering into view, recognising the brutality of instrumental management approaches to academic work. Speaking the unspoken ‘names the heightened sense of anxiety, powerlessness, mistrust and “terror” among members of academic institutions and allows it to be reinterpreted’ (Worline & Dutton, 2022, p. 36).

When staff suffering is reinterpreted as a threat to the integrity of one’s identity and experience as an educator we can then look and reflect more carefully and critically. For example by asking: when, where and how we can meet threats to our academic integrity with self-compassion? Teaching with compassion invites exploration of one’s failures and frailties and requires spaces in which teachers can encounter their suffering with concern and care (Nowlan, 2021). In the field of management education, if/when students – who then go on to become higher education managers and leaders – experience teaching that is infused with compassion, might this counteract the ‘brutality’ of academic management approaches that Worline and Dutton refer to? While this may seem a little naïve, fundamentally there must be a place for compassion in the ‘measured university’. This requires a systemic approach where compassion infuses *all* aspects of academic work and university life, including researching, writing and reviewing with compassion.

Researching, writing and reviewing with compassion

Tight (2024) offers critical reflections on the journal article peer review process, noting that it is one of the more troubling areas of academic life. He concludes by suggesting: ‘perhaps we need some kind of general academic Hippocratic Oath, whereby we undertake to be supportive, as well as critical, of our fellow academics and students’ (p. 1208). According to Shmerling (2020), the Hippocratic Oath is a reminder that doctors should not underestimate their capacity to cause harm. By extension therefore, peer review and academic publishing processes should not cause harm and suffering; instead they must be underpinned by compassion.

Nevertheless, relentless pressure to generate research income and publish one’s research outputs in high-ranking journals which are measured and audited is still the hallmark of neoliberal ideology. Hammond’s (2021) account of strong emotions experienced during a 5-day writing retreat illustrates how neoliberalism drives a culture of individualism, which for her, became internalised. The resultant conflict between ideas of writing retreats as spaces for ‘restorative practice’ (p. 1437) and pressure to produce was examined through autoethnographic inquiry and analysed using a self-compassion framework based on Gilbert’s (2010) drive, threat and soothe emotion regulation systems. Very briefly, drive includes feelings of excitement and energy; threat involves feeling anxious and angry; while soothe involves feeling calm and contented. Hammond concluded:

I gained deeper insight into how my emotions were manifesting and how they had been influenced by the wider neoliberal context. I used this insight to move from a reactive, dis-empowered identity responding blindly to performativity pressures, to a more well-being focused balance of seeking joy across the research process. (2021, p. 1449)

Breslin (2021) highlights the stark shortcomings of university cultures of individualism which simply intensify elitism, where ‘high performing scholars [see themselves] as different, and part of an exclusive club’ (p. 41). The solution, according to Breslin, is to challenge the social norms that currently exist within universities, and a shift away from ‘individual-level gamesmanship [towards] altruism, compassion, and social cohesion’ (2021, p. 49). Thus altruism and social cohesion become companions to compassion and self-compassion in higher education.

Conclusion: creating compassionate learning cultures

Paradoxically perhaps, creating and sustaining compassionate learning cultures and spaces where relational pedagogies can thrive begins with: (a) rethinking how suffering is conceptualised from *student* perspectives; but (b) breaking the silence around *staff suffering* and calling it out. It is about putting humanity ‘on display’ by placing compassion and relationships first and academic content second; what Neuwirth et al. (2021, p. 153) refer to as ‘balancing rigour with compassion’. This requires courage and creation of psychologically safe learning environments where students and staff can communicate with honesty, vulnerability, mutual respect, care and concern.

We end with a health warning and a hope for the future. First, by returning to Simpson et al.’s (2014) caution against seeing compassion in either an overly simplistic manner or regarding it as an essentially ‘positive’ social good. While we unreservedly believe that compassion is key to the future for relational pedagogies – and much, much more – we also advocate against overly simplistic and uncritically positive approaches to addressing the paradoxical nature of compassion in higher education. Second, by invoking the spirit of hope without illusion, which is ‘based on the need for truth as an ethical quality of the struggle’ (Freire, 1992, p. 2). Creation and cultivation of compassionate learning cultures and campuses will give today’s students opportunities to solve tomorrow’s challenges. In turn, this will support development of a more diverse, inclusive and equitable future. A future where those previously marginalised are seen, valued, respected and feel a sense of belonging. We need to direct attention and resources to transforming systems and developing practices that provide space for valuing a multiplicity of student and staff experiences. If we recognise, value and respect diversity, then the creation of compassionate cultures where relational pedagogies can thrive can become the catalyst for more inclusive, equitable and diverse societies.

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