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The role of compassion in higher education practices

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The role of compassion in higher education practices

Abstract

Compassion in higher education is viewed in different ways by educators. In recent years a focus on using compassionate pedagogy and being authentic, compassionate educators has arisen. Often associated with 'care', compassion has been labelled at times to be 'soft' or even 'fluffy' and holding emotion. Rather, we argue – through critically exploring discourses of compassion and care – that by acknowledging higher education has a relational element encompassing purposeful and trusting relationships, interactions can hold more meaning and benefit. This Editorial seeks to position the role of compassion in higher education, challenging how compassion focused pedagogy and research can be incorporated and enacted so it can benefit the future of higher education. We consider compassion in learning and teaching practices and in assessment, looking with hope to the future where we may see educational values lived in and through our teaching practices.

Practitioner Notes

1. Compassionate pedagogy promotes human connection, communication and wellbeing and requires consideration by higher education educators as they consider their teaching practices and approaches
2. Students need to experience a compassionate learning environment to enable translation of compassionate behaviour into their future professional practices
3. Communication in higher education is suggested to be the linchpin of compassionate pedagogy
4. Critically considering compassion focused pedagogy and research will produce stronger, more practicable results for peers, colleagues and researchers
5. Genuinely questioning research into the role of compassion in the work of higher educational professionals will enable educators to move forward in our teaching, our assessment practices, and our interactions with colleagues and students

Keywords

Pedagogy; compassion; teaching practice

Introduction

Compassion in higher education may be seen as a buzzword or a necessity following the pandemic. When applied in higher education practices and assessments, authentic compassionate practices can be used to change the landscape of higher education for the better. Compassionate pedagogy promotes human connection, communication and wellbeing and hence is a topic worthy of consideration by higher education educators as they consider their teaching practices and approaches. This Editorial seeks to critique and highlight key factors associated with compassion in higher education to challenge educators around assumptions, practices and interactions with students, as we believe that compassion will only benefit the future of higher education.

Questions around the place of compassion in higher education have informed publications, symposia, and major conferences. Two recent examples are, first, The University of Aberdeen's Re-Imagining Education: Collaboration and Compassion conference of the *International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association*, which posited the humanistic principle that our needs for collaboration and compassion as facets of wellbeing have been foregrounded during the pandemic. Second, the University of Plymouth's *Collaboration for Compassion in Healthcare Education* conference, which considered whether compassion is an optional or essential component of wellbeing, and necessary in Higher Education. Together with an increasing interest in mindfulness (Tan, 2022), emotional intelligence (Gill, 2021), authentic leaders (Butler-Henderson & Crawford, 2020; Gardner et al., 2011), and Indigenous ways of being, learning and thinking in the academy (Smith, 2013), this emphasis on the place of compassion in conference scholarship in 2023 indicates it is central to our Zeitgeist. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, 'aroha', a concept informing the values systems of many higher educational institutions, means 'compassion' (Elder, 2020) and aligns also with related concepts as empathy and care. Compassion would appear to lie at the heart of any strategy for informing, and re-forming, educational cultures from 2023 onwards. If compassion plays a role in higher education, then what role does it play, and who are its players?

Humanising learning was a theme of pandemic-era scholarship (Mueller et al., 2022; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020; Stephens, 2021; Tan, 2022; Vandeyar, 2021). A return to the humane in teaching, learning, and researching speaks to a critical, Freirean advocacy for empathy and compassion and hence wellbeing (Tan, 2022). The role of compassion promises to be crucial, and as educational practitioners and researchers, we owe it to ourselves and our learning communities to consider our own capacity and potential for compassion: for our learners, for our peers and colleagues, for readers of our research; for ourselves. Since 'compassion' is an emotive term that is difficult to define, this Editorial opens with a critical exploration of 'compassion' and 'care', and then moves, also critically, into the space of teaching and learning, with emphasis on assessment processes. Finally, we realise that the impetus towards compassion in educational research has

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been there all along; occluded in First Nation and Indigenous ways of being and researching and buried within a broader and more holistic theme of wellbeing.

The pandemic may have brought to the fore our need for compassion in the light of the suffering and disruption witnessed in the past three or four years, but the need for compassion had already been starting to crystallise in discourses of higher education, particularly those concerned with the deleterious impacts of neoliberalism. Neoliberalist capitalism famously places measured and audited capital over the emotional capital of experience and feeling (Giroux, 2002, 2014). In 1956's *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm wrote: "Capital commands labour, amassed things, that which is dead, are of superior value, to human powers, to that which is alive" (p. 78). Ensuring wellbeing in that which is alive is surely an imperative not merely of educators and researchers, but of all humanity. Since the pandemic opened reflective spaces for us to consider the importance of that which lives, of the human side of our powers, we have an opportunity to understand the role of compassion, a core aspect of wellbeing, in our work and workplaces. To use a metaphor employed by Davies and Gannon (2006) in their dissection of the neoliberalised university, we can lift the "veil of silence around emotions and bodies" (p. 3).

However, to lift the veil around affect and physicality in a space occupied by neoliberalist capitalism remains a challenge, and to set up a simple equation of *compassion=kind=the answer* is to ignore the critical reality that compassion itself is a commodity and may end up being a mere placebo, a quick fix. The real pandemic, we see, is incipient and residual neoliberalist capitalism itself, with its powers both to exclude true compassion for university educators and learners and to co-opt and suborn it as a packaged commodity labelled 'duty of care'. Let us start lifting the veil by critically considering views of compassion in existing scholarship.

Critical Challenges of Defining 'Compassion' and 'Care'

One view of compassion is that it operates in the 'affective' domain of experience (Beard et al., 2007). This view holds that it is emotional, involves additional 'emotional labour', and, due to intensity of demand, that it can lead to 'compassion fatigue' (Cordaro, 2020). Such exhaustion is two-fold, due to the tension between the dominant yet opposing narratives of higher education globally in the twenty-first century: namely, that colleagues must performatively be led-by-the-metrics and that they must also *care* (Tett et al., 2017). Hence, care becomes yet another measurable commodity that educators 'perform'. And this push-pull exposes several problems the compassionate educator and researcher must consider, key ones being: What could compassion encompass in higher education? Is it a function of the individual educator? Does it operate at macro and meso levels as well as the micro? Is it imposed and/or resisted by institutions?

There is both a nature and nurture argument about compassion and a tendency to conflate it with 'care'. Is compassion a skill, an emotion, an aptitude? Are some colleagues 'naturally' more compassionate than others? Is this capacity for compassion (or not) gendered and/or racialised? And if we consider that narrative of 'care' for a moment, is compassion the same as care? If so, then care and empathy were critically analysed by Nel Noddings back in the 1980s, as highly gendered, more likely to be the work of already marginalised colleagues and, therefore, could not, ethically, be an essential component of teaching (1984). Noddings argued that marginalised individuals may be more adept at care, due to their experiences, which might today be referred

to as ‘lived experience’ (1984). In short, not every individual in higher education has equal access to capacity for compassion.

A key problem with defining ‘compassion’ as ‘care’ is the backlash to what has been termed ‘therapeutic’ education (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008). In *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (2008), Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes argue that the quiet growth of a ‘therapeutic ethos’ from primary school to the university to the workplace, limits the ‘resilience’ of learners and instead creates co-dependency. Within higher education, the spectre of dependency is particularly troubling considering the importance of *independence* as a graduate attribute. And yet, is some dependence necessary, at least at first, for the establishment of purposeful and trusting relationships? And is the term ‘resilience’ at best patronising, in a world that is so fractured and complex, and at worst, taking the view that marginalisation and discrimination can be overcome by ‘toughening up’. And where does compassion fit within these overlapping, contradictory matrices? If it is a form of care, is it also therapeutic? If not, can resilience be compassionate? It is these challenging questions that the compassionate, yet critical, educator-researcher should consider.

However, acknowledging compassion as affective, at least some of the time, can be more fluid if read as an example of ‘relational pedagogy’. Such an approach acknowledges the role of emotion in all educational encounters (Beard et al., 2007). Acknowledging emotion, then, reveals the centrality of purposeful, trusting relationships, as above, for the success of everything that follows. For example, Beard et al.’s 2007 article, ‘Acknowledging the affective in Higher Education’, notes that rich conceptions of students as affective/embodied and the role of emotions in education, are both under-researched and therefore under-theorised. But through a literature review of ‘emotion’ and a case study mapping the emotional journeys of students over their first year at university, the article concludes that it *is* possible to account for the affective in higher education “without a collapse into therapeutic discourses” (Beard et al., 2007, p. 235). Alternatively, Murphy and Brown, also relational pedagogists, explore if emotions – especially around trust, recognition and respect – are even possible given “the increasing influence of consumerism on student identity” (Murphy & Brown, 2012, p. 643). Their engagement with psychoanalysis and critical theory, especially the work of Axel Honneth, is careful to avoid the word ‘compassion’, instead focusing on the importance of social recognition – and the devastating consequences when someone is *misrecognised*. Perhaps also ‘anti-resilience’, or the simplicity of individual-focused resilience discourse, Murphy and Brown (2012) call strongly for a space to be made for doubt, confusion and anxiety, as core to relationships of any kind, including (perhaps especially) educational ones.

And yet, the fact of students and staff having emotional lives, especially staff, should not be co-opted to underpin institutional policy, as this misplaces structural work and responsibility on the individual. For example, the rise of ‘carewashing’ (after ‘greenwashing’, Vieira de Freitas Netto et al., 2020) in all sectors in the wake of COVID-19, places the imperative to ‘be kind’ on us all. Governmental and institutional messaging around kindness, care and, indeed, compassion, can be experienced as a form of control and, from a critical pedagogy perspective (and other politicised viewpoints), have been read as oppressive, exploitative and unequal – as well as being hard to challenge (Friere, 2018; Giroux, 2002, 2014; Seal & Smith, 2021). Who can reasonably reject being asked to ‘be kind’, even if the imperative disguises additional emotional labour that cannot be accounted for using any contract or workload model? Similar to and aligned with the

hidden costs of volunteerism and presenteeism, co-opted compassion cannot mitigate lack of strategy or policy. Now, we turn to the learners, and their need for compassion, commodity or not. We wonder whether compassion can keep the wolf from the door.

The Wolf of Compassion in Teaching and Learning

Does compassion breed compassion? In her 2016 paper, Waddington suggests that there is a compassion gap in universities, arguing that if students do not experience a compassionate learning environment, it is of no surprise that they do not translate compassionate behaviour into their future professional practices. Gibbs (2017, p. 1) recognises the potential for compassion to be “woven into the ethos of higher education” but, along with Waddington (2017), acknowledges that social, cultural and organisational systems can either facilitate or inhibit compassion. Through their presentation and delivery of organisational experiences, they have the capacity to perpetuate the status quo or change it in a humane way. Waddington (2017, p. 55) highlights the ‘dark side’ of organisational experiences in universities using the *wolf of compassion* metaphor, based on a Cherokee proverb:

He said to them, ‘A fight is going on inside me... it is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other wolf stands for joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too.’ They thought about it for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, ‘Which wolf will win?’ The old Cherokee simply replied... ‘The one you feed.’ (Compassion Lab, 2013; cited in Waddington, 2017, p. 55).

For Waddington (2017), the wolf analogy resonates with the fight going on inside universities, beyond the surface, between individuals and those organisational systems concretised by neoliberal capitalism. The metaphor also suggests the importance of considering the human and lived experiences inside the organisation; we may ask - who or what is feeding which wolf?

This is an interesting question to explore in relation to the recent emphases within higher education discussed in our introduction. The trauma of the pandemic experience has led to a greater humanising discourse around education and the need to embrace pedagogies of kindness, care and compassion (e.g., Stephens, 2021; Vandeyar, 2021). There has also been much attention drawn to suffering caused to students’ emotional health and wellbeing (e.g., Lee, Jeong, & Kim, 2021; Spears & Green, 2022), leading to calls for greater care and support to be given. These calls align to views that universities should be “care-giving organisations” (Kahn, 2005; cited in Waddington, 2016, p. 3). However, as we saw in the previous section, scholars highlight the conflicting and sometimes contradictory purposes of compassion and care in higher education. Barnett (2019, p. 51), for example, claims that questions about how the university can develop an “ethos of care towards its members” run “with much antagonistic force” against questions relating to how it can fulfil its other supposed functions, such as contributing to a well-functioning economy or national identity. The wolf metaphor is again apparent in questions like these about the purposes of higher education: which is the wolf (or function) that we feed? And how do we feed that wolf? Universities may espouse an ethos of care and compassion, but their policies, systems and structures may in fact be feeding the darker side, the side of the

neoliberalism capitalism we discussed earlier. If our lived experiences are subject to and defined by those systems, structures and policies, then arguably the hand with words of kindness and care is an empty hand; sustenance for the wolf is coming from the systemic hand.

Cases of Compassion in Assessment

The topic of assessment provides a tangible example through which we can consider a possible gap between an ethos of compassion and the lived experiences of educators and learners. Whilst compassionate assessment does not yet feature prominently in higher education assessment literature, authentic and inclusive assessment do. Considering the latter, we can recognise that certain values inherent within inclusive assessment relate to compassion through the desire to recognise and alleviate the distressing and exclusionary experiences that the assessment process may create for some students. Calls for inclusive assessment encourage educators to consider, among other things, the relevance and appropriateness of assessment methods used for their student cohorts, the development of students' assessment literacy skills and the implementation of formative dialogic feedback approaches (see for example Ajjawi et al., 2023). An ethos of care and support can be seen as central to these approaches, particularly when we bring into our hearts the impacts of COVID-19 on learning trajectories. However, if we can make the case that assessment can be damaging to students, then we may follow Ramrathan's (2017, p. 111) argument that "showing compassion only through care and support is insufficient". Structural and programmatic changes are also required to provide a compassionate environment for students. Short-term compassion is no remedy for the long-term systemic and political problems of neoliberalised higher education.

Harlen and Deakin Crick, in 2002, presented the results of a systematic review of studies that investigated assessment for summative purposes in schools for students between the ages of four and 19. They found that many studies reported detrimental impacts on students' motivations for learning, which included negative effects on self-esteem and self-worth as learners, and feelings of fear and anxiety around assessment. Since then, a wealth of evidence has been gathered that reports similar detrimental impacts for students in higher education (Cramp et al., 2012; Harley et al., 2021; Shields, 2015). We know that assessment can be a highly emotive experience for students, and evidence supports the case that it can have damaging impacts on students too. So, in line with Ramrathan (2017), we need to move beyond a view that educators embedding further care and support into their assessment activities is sufficient to address this damage. Instead, structural changes are required.

Before we even imagine this scenario, it behoves us to consider what structural or systemic elements of assessment may be causing certain damage to students. In other words, we should attempt to address questions about how students are living the experience of assessment through the institutional structures and systems that create the assessment environment and what damage this may create. We briefly consider two specific features, 'special' circumstances and the issue of marking loads and turnarounds, below.

Special or Mitigating Circumstances in Assessment

Notwithstanding that any day during the COVID-19 pandemic appeared extraordinary, most assessment policies will allow a student to be granted an extension to a deadline under exceptional circumstances, such as illness or family bereavement. These circumstances,

however, must be proved *before* the extension is granted, which means that students must deal with a range of organisational procedures during what may be a very traumatic period, such as obtaining and submitting a death certificate, to gain some extra time to complete their assignment. We are aware anecdotally of the emotional toll this also places on educators who are in the position of having to enforce this rule with their students. Additionally, McArthur (2016, p. 973) argues that special circumstances often rest on an 'ideal-type assumption about the 'normal' conditions under which students live, study and complete assessments':

So illness is a socially acceptable reason for deserving different treatment, but differences in economic class which lead some students to have to work long hours of paid employment in order to go to university or to go without useful aids such as laptops, books and even heating, are not deemed reasonable grounds for different treatment (McArthur, 2016 p.973).

McArthur (2016) is not suggesting that the practice of special circumstances is abandoned altogether. Rather, she is concerned with illuminating, and therefore encouraging rethinking of, the socially constructed notions that are dictated in institutional policies of what should and should not count as deserving of mitigating treatment. If we do not rethink, we may be limiting the justice and fairness, and hence compassion, that some students are able to receive in this process.

Marking Loads and Return of Feedback Policies

We note above that assessment is an emotive experience for students and there has been much attention in literature given to feedback practice that "encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem" (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006 p. 205). We also know, however, that educators are often dealing with huge marking loads and institutionally dictated turnaround times that require marks and feedback to be returned to students within a specified amount of time. The audit culture of neoliberalised capitalism is, perhaps, the true wolf needed to be kept from the door. This situation places massive burden on staff and, anecdotally, it is common to hear of colleagues needing to use their weekends and evenings to complete their marking loads (Arnold, 2010). Miller (2019) reports that marking loads, amongst other aspects of the academic role, often take excessive amounts of evening and weekend time. These practices are common globally and are at odds with universities' professions of being caring employers with a duty of care to their educators.

At the very least, this situation suggests a lack of compassion from the institution who do not recognise the burden and stresses being placed on staff (and their personal lives). It also has the potential to impact the lived assessment experience for students in two ways:

- 1) Large marking loads and turnaround time pressures may reduce the ability of staff to notice and respond to any negative emotions being presented by students during the assessment process;
- 2) Educators may distance themselves emotionally from students.

Spaeth (2018) argues that feedback promoting positive affective responses requires emotional labour from the educator; however, "workload models typically allocate less time than it takes in reality to give considered feedback that is fair, consistent...as well as being emotionally nurturing for the student" (p. 84). High volumes of marking increase the pressure on educators, which may

lead to them distancing themselves emotionally, “potentially resulting in feedback that does not engage with the students’ emotional needs” (Spaeth, 2018 p. 84).

Hope and Other Choices

Barcan’s 2013 study of labour in the ‘new’ (read ‘neoliberal’) university revealed the push factors of those leaving university employment, particularly death by workload, but still managed to subtitle itself *Hope and other choices*. As we enter 2023, the fourth (or is it fifth?) year of the pandemic, the wellbeing of educators and learners, as epitomised by the observation that compassion is currently cool, is very much to the fore. Although hope may not be easy to see in this Zeitgeist, it can be found in the continued impetus towards humanising pedagogy, increased impacts of authentic leadership and authentic assessment, and the communal values inherent in indigenous ways of being and researching. Each of these, arguably, plays a minor role in resisting the wolfish teeth of neoliberal ideology and each of these validates compassion as a facet of wellbeing.

A proponent of humanising pedagogy, del Carmen Salazar (2013) supports a humanistic, mentorly, empathetic approach to teaching, learning and assessment at all levels to develop cognition and socialisation and promote wellbeing. Enhanced trust, engagement and knowledge-sharing result, according to Butler-Henderson and Crawford (2020) in their study of tertiary educators as authentic leaders, result from teaching and learning contexts where the educator demonstrates ethical positivity, heightened awareness and a balanced positivity that avoids the ‘positivity trap’ for which Alvesson and Einola (2019) criticised authentic leadership. Cloying Pollyannaism and buzzwordism is absent, too, from authentic assessment, which is characterised by its emphases on reflective feed-forward (as opposed to summative feedback), a strengths-based approach within real-world settings and attending to the student voice. Such an approach to assessment, according to Chong King Man (2018) has the capacity to develop empathy, which McArthur (2023, p. 95) defines as “a sense of what the student does and how this may impact on the lives of others”. McArthur (2023) goes further, tracing a path between assessment authenticity and the increased self-understanding and wellbeing of learners. This is because authentic assessment contains hope: a sense of what the world could be, as opposed to what it is.

Organisations, including tertiary educational organisations, define their culture through values, often with a four pillars approach, and words such as *agility*, *flexibility*, *resilience* are commonplace alongside, in a specific example, *excellence*, *respect* and *service* (University of Auckland, 2022) and, *respect*, *responsibility*, *fairness*, *integrity*, and, surprisingly, *empathy* for Victoria University of Wellington (2022). “Empathy” is interesting here and we can speculate it was added as a fifth pillar because of a perceived need or because of geo-politically bicultural alignment with *aroha*. Nevertheless, is it an example of organisational values requiring emotional labour and can thus be seen as a co-opting of emotions as labour and even carewashing.

Although we may never see *compassion* as an explicit core value, the space where values inform culture is a space of possibility for compassion. Aotearoa New Zealand, our most immediate first nation example, aligns such values as *empathy* with a (not uncontested) national project of decolonising teaching and learning and research (Smith, 2013). Deep in the heart of Mātauranga Māori, the lived theories and practices of being in the world, we find *aroha* (love, compassion, empathy), *mana* (respect, prestige) and *wairua* (capacity for spirituality). The relational and

communal processes of *whanaungatanga* (nurturing and community-building practices within a *whānau* [family] or other community) inform all stages of pedagogy, research and its methodologies in such a way that compassion never seems perfunctory, Pollyannaish or buzzwordy. Indeed, this entire discussion of the place of compassion in higher education would never occur in Mātauranga Māori. The non-competitive maintenance of stability, harmony and mutual commitment result from the continued presence of *aroha* in classrooms and research groups, and *aroha* now underpins organisational values explicitly in such organisations as Canterbury University (2022). It sits in curricula from early childhood, as in Kapa Haka or performing arts groups (Fraser, 2014). Spaces of hope, characterised by compassion, open out in decolonised pedagogies and research methodologies and are part of the lived and living values of an organisation. What this, perhaps, starts to show is the importance of decolonising neoliberalism in higher education and acts of reconsidering our missions and values in light of what we have learned from the pandemic. Many universities defaulted to its norms as they emerged from it, blind to the fact that neoliberal values are the true wolves keeping compassion from our doors.

Conclusion

This Editorial has explored discourses of compassion and care and challenges a critical reading of compassion-focused pedagogy and research. It is our view that such criticality will produce stronger, more practicable results for peers, colleagues and researchers. Ultimately, all higher education practitioners have an emotional life, but institutional policy cannot co-opt emotions as work, for work, or in place of structural protections. Papers published in this Journal (and specifically in the Developing Teaching Practice section) should consider areas deserving of further scrutiny in this space. Assessment policies are one specific example, as in such under-examined phrases as ‘compassionate pass’ and ‘compassionate withdrawal’. So too, the notion of communication being perhaps the linchpin of compassionate pedagogy. There may, however, be a place if organisations reconsider, post pandemic, what their values truly are now and how those values can be united into cultures made up of shared values. With the cautions offered here, it is clear compassion must play a role in post pandemic higher educational values at a time when neoliberalist values are closely under scrutiny; but it is commonly only implicit, as in such perfunctory phrases as ‘duty of care’. If compassion does play a role in higher education, then surely all of us are players; but with cautions. Genuinely questioning research into the role of compassion in the work of higher educational professionals will help us all move forward – in our teaching, our assessment, and our interactions. These elements are what we would like to leave with readers as we challenge how we present ourselves as compassionate humans who are modelling flexibility, empathy and grace.

Conflict of Interest

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