# Developing pedagogies of compassion: policy, principles, and practice

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**Keywords:** *Compassionate pedagogy, intelligent compassion, intelligent action, practice-based knowledge, higher education policy*

## Introduction: background and higher education policy context

This article focuses on what might be called the 'compassion turn' in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), evolving as an antidote to the damaging effects of over four decades of toxic, neoliberal higher education (HE) policy (Pedersen, 2021; Smyth, 2017). Work by Gibbs (2017) and Waddington (2021) led to the recent edited collection: *Developing pedagogies of compassion in Higher Education: a practice first approach* (Waddington and Bonaparte, 2024), which addresses intersections and gaps between practice, theory, and research that both connect and divide compassion and pedagogies. This article presents an overview of core themes that need to be woven into a new HE policy narrative, and principles of a 'practice first' approach that will enable pedagogies of compassion to develop and flourish. It offers a significant contribution to understanding the need for compassion in twenty-first century universities, while simultaneously understanding the harsh HE landscape, and the need to disrupt this in ways that Killam (2023, p. 35) suggests:

> Offering compassion as a throughline of inquiry, I wonder if/how it is possible for compassion to disrupt neoliberalism through the precarity of individual and systemic enaction. … Can/does compassion create

> breeches [*sic*] for new possibilities?

The neoliberal push towards individualism presents an opportunity for compassion to rebuild a path to communities of practice first laid down by Lave and Wenger (1991). Core themes that need to be woven into a new HE policy narrative to develop and support critical pedagogies of compassion are: (i) belonging; (ii) caring; (iii) emotion; (iv) respect; (v) kindness; and (vi) human relationships (for example, see Blake, Capper and Jackson, 2022; Bovill, 2020; Unwin, 2018). These HE policy themes are explored in more depth in Haroun (2024), which illustrates a narrative approach to practising compassion, and Waddington and Bonaparte (2024), which offers a creative collection of essays on compassionate practices including classical Eastern philosophies and the neuroscience of compassion.

The overarching aim and direction of the compassion turn in is to integrate a wide range of interdisciplinary, theoretical, and professional perspectives and create new ways in which compassion can be a guiding ethos for a different form of university and campus. Additionally, and perhaps more feasibly, it asks how compassion can become contagious in current organisational structures. A core assumption is that students benefit from faculty members who find meaning in their work and who have compassion for others. This requires a predominantly practical approach to building compassionate pedagogies and praxis based on the experiences of practitioners and students as co-creators and co-researchers (for example, Bovill, 2020; Waddington and Bonaparte, 2022).

The Latin root for the word compassion is *pati*, which means ‘to suffer’, and the prefix, ‘com’ means ‘with’, thus the linguistic origin of compassion literally means ‘to suffer with’. Compassion is embodied in recognising the suffering of others, considering the seriousness of it, and having the intent to do something about it. However, it is not pity, which has potentially patronising outcomes, and a risk of projecting unwanted and unnecessary thoughts and feelings onto that other person. Compassion requires the participation of the other person, which Hoggett (2009, p. 147) calls ‘intelligent compassion whereby one can feel the pain and think critically about the injustice, thereby fusing an ethic of care to an ethic of justice’. In essence, intelligent compassion should lead to intelligent action.

Intelligent compassion also requires us to think critically about the language of compassion and suffering when used in an HE context. Such language can, potentially, reinforce stereotypes and hierarchical dynamics of power that hinder genuine understanding of student experiences and assumptions around learning and teaching. In the realm of HE, where fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment is crucial, it is essential to examine the limitations of using such language and reshape it in a manner that promotes inclusivity, empowerment, and authenticity. We need to question whether students want to be seen as suffering – as victims. We need to ask, 'What does/should compassion in the classroom and other (formal and informal) spaces of learning and teaching look and feel like?' This is critical compassion, as there is a danger that uncritical compassion fosters, within the privileged, actions of problem-solving and advocacy on behalf of 'the suffering'.

The terms 'pedagogy of compassion' and 'compassionate pedagogy' can be used in practice in both singular and plural forms. Zembylas (2017, p. 183), for example, used the term 'critical and strategic pedagogies of compassion' to describe pedagogies that engage educators and students in critical interrogation of the intersections between power, praxis, and emotion. While Gibbs' (2017) collection, *The pedagogy of compassion at the heart of higher education*, can be used as an overarching philosophical and moral position, based on the principles that compassion: (i) is founded on the dignity and limitations of humanity; (ii) is universal – it is for, and with, everybody and must be given unconditionally; and (iii) inevitably expresses itself in the fight for justice. The related term 'compassionate pedagogy' draws on Waddington and Bonaparte's (2022) research into compassionate pedagogical practice with undergraduate psychology students as co-researchers, which resulted in the following definition:

> Recognising and noticing the difference, discrimination, and bias in how people are being treated, how students are learning and being taught, and the compassionate actions – both strategic and small – that we all need to take to promote and support student and staff wellbeing. (p. 14)

The above student-co-created definition reflects the principles of a 'practice first' approach, which is addressed next.

**Principles of a 'practice first' approach**

Haroun (2021, p. 113) coined the term 'practice first approach', arguing that:

> Compassion cannot be understood purely as a theoretical concept. To truly grasp it, we need to understand it in a lived and embodied way so that we can notice when it's missing and have the skills and attributes to practice it actively.

Compassion is often talked about from an individual perspective, situated within the concept of behaviour. Cohn (2014) criticises 'health' behaviour as being overly simplistic because it excludes the social, affective, material, and interrelation aspects of human activity. If we replace the concept of 'health' with 'compassion' regarding behaviours, this could lead to a narrow understanding of compassion that is situated solely within the individual. Cohn goes on to argue that if we think about these concepts from a practice perspective, there is a broadening that becomes more inclusive of specific contexts and is influenced by a variety of social and material factors. The term 'practice' offers resistance to the individualising assumptions of behaviour, emphasising the importance of agency and the socio-cultural context.

If we situate compassionate practice within the collective – rather than focusing on individualist understanding of the concept – we are more likely to address the structural challenges that cause suffering in the first place. This can be achieved in a number of ways; for example, by developing compassionate communities of practice (see Parsons *et al*., 2019), and/or embedding compassion into existing communities of practice. From a research perspective, Witkin (2016) contends that practice should be the primary context of knowledge generation since it is where such knowledge will be applied. He goes on to argue that practitioner-based research need not conform to the protocols of conventional research, and emphasis should be on how critically reflective practitioners learn from their practice, and how they transform information into knowledge and make it actionable. This is particularly relevant to our argument that intelligent compassion should lead to intelligent action. But first, we need to cultivate the conditions for pedagogies of compassion to flourish. To do this, the ground needs to be cleared, and new pathways laid. When making a pathway in the 'real world' there are two key questions to consider: 'What will be its purpose?' and, 'Will the land on which it is laid match that purpose

or can it be restructured?'.

The metaphorical point is that the current neoliberal HE landscape is not fit for purpose. Hierarchal compassionate practice needs to be flattened to create an inclusive and equitable landscape that enables us to recognise and notice difference, discrimination, and bias in how people are treated and how students are learning and being taught. This will pave the way for the compassionate actions – both strategic and small – that we all need to take to promote and support student and staff wellbeing.

The themes of belonging, caring, emotion, kindness, respect, and human relationships that are interwoven into the policy narrative in Waddington and Bonaparte (2024) can also be seen as seeds that need to be cultivated and grown in our universities. Godfrey, Larkin-Wells and Jordan (2024, p. 78) encourage us to see seeds not as a metaphor but as a symbol: 'Symbols express and represent meaning. Meaning helps provide an understanding in the lives of human beings'. Taking belonging as an example, Ahn and Davis (2020) contend that for many students, a sense of belonging is essential to their engagement, academic success, self-confidence, mental health, and wellbeing. We contend that the 'seed of belonging' should be nurtured further to embody a sense of companionship and 'mattering' in relation to compassion, which can be extended to both students and staff. When we feel that we matter, and when we create spaces where others matter, this links to belonging but in a more inclusive way.

For Nancy Kline (2020), one of the components of a thinking environment (which is what universities are) is a place that says to people 'you matter', and that people think at their best when they notice that the environment in which they are thinking also reflects a sense that 'you matter'. This can be reflected in timely responses to email, remembering and using students' first/preferred names, and for students to feel valued as individuals with unique identities and experiences (Bonaparte, 2024). Jordan and Schwartz (2018, p. 28) advance the notion of 'intellectual mattering', which is 'when we tell our students that their thinking or their questions have sparked our interest, deepened our learning, inspired us, or, in some other way, contributed to our lives as teachers'. This, they argue, can offset feelings of 'un-belonging' and defensiveness arising as a consequence of earlier educational experiences of failure, public humiliation, and shame.

Action learning is also a way of nurturing pedagogies of compassion and self-compassion (Nowlan, 2021) and is a powerful method for developing critical thinking, problem solving, creative solutions, and innovative practice (Action Learning Associates, 2024). Revans (2011) used the term 'comrades in adversity' to describe ways that action learning groups help and support each other to understand and take action to tackle the problems that each member is facing. Although SoTL is making significant progress in the compassion turn in HE, there are still some harsh realities and adversities to be faced. The move towards compassion in our universities requires a radical shift to address external pressures of marketisation, staff and student welfare and wellbeing, and the climate crisis. This requires hope without illusion, and hope that is anchored in practice, leading to us to ask, do we now need to be 'comrades in compassion'?

To conclude, in writing this piece, we have reflected on the language of compassion, the appropriateness of notions of suffering to describe students' experiences, and the importance of intelligent compassion and intelligent action. Belonging and companionship have emerged as key concepts, and rather than using the language of adversity, do we, perhaps, need, instead, to be talking in terms of 'companions in compassion'? It might be argued that the term 'comrade' has political, militaristic, and specifically masculine associations, while the term 'companion' is gender neutral, and has kinder associations with someone who is a friend, ally, or partner in compassion. Yet, critical compassion is also political, especially as we move towards developing pedagogies of compassion, and move away from neoliberal notions of universities as 'academic factories'. Therefore, we conclude with a question:

Are we now engaged in a battle for shaping the soul of HE and universities of the future?

We will leave it for readers to reflect on this question, and consider where, why, and how they position themselves on the comrade-to-companion continuum of compassion!

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all the students we have taught and learned with, and the conversations we have shared with colleagues as companions and comrades in compassion.

The Editorial Board would like to thank Dr. Gabriella F. Buttarazzi and Dr. Valbona Nathanaili for their collegiate generosity in supporting the reviewing of this piece.

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