



Incorporating care and compassion into the neoliberal academy

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Abstract

UK policymakers advocate compassionate pedagogical processes. However, the longstanding commitment to neoliberal higher education principles have produced, and indeed necessitate, inequality, conflict, and a lack of interpersonal care. We argue that compassionate academic processes demand holistic structural and discursive shifts that decentre competitive individualism and foreground care of oneself and others. To do this, we advocate recognition of and resistance to ‘care-less’ neoliberal discourses, with a ‘care-full’ co-production of relational learning environments that are psychologically safe, culturally and emotionally responsive, and structurally accessible.

Keywords: compassion; neoliberalism; assessment.

Introduction: the (im)possibility of compassionate academic processes

In 2023, Robert Halfon, the UK Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education (2022–2024), established a Higher Education Mental Health Taskforce with a remit ‘to deliver a university student commitment on compassionate academic processes’ (Halfon, 2023, p.3). This paper argues, however, that compassionate academic processes are conceptually inconsistent with successive UK governments’ commitment to the core tenets of neoliberal higher education policy; namely individualism, competition, and privatisation.

The emergence of caring and compassionate pedagogies

Prominent educational philosophers (e.g. Nussbaum, 2001) and psychologists (e.g. Boekaerts and Pekrun, 2016) have postulated that compassion is a necessary value for learning, centred on understanding the experience of the other, expanding the boundaries of knowledge, and stimulating cognitive learning processes. However, grounded in the Cartesian dualism between rationality and affect, Western education has traditionally denigrated care and compassion as values that compromise the pursuit of knowledge. The emerging scholarly interest in care has been concurrent and respondent to clear signs of social disconnection and non-belonging among students. This, we suggest, indicates an erosion of caring relationships in which individuals feel personally valued and emotionally supported within the current neoliberal education system. Indeed, our own work on student loneliness has consistently highlighted structural barriers to the formation of emotionally supportive and caring connections with others. Staff, too, work at the coalface of these structures, and the manifestations of their discontent — low morale and increasingly frequent industrial action in the UK between 2018 and 2023 — should be seen as, in part, an outcome of an endemic deficit of care.

Neoliberal higher education principles

Due to a succession of policy choices and structural changes, higher education in Britain has, since the late 1980s, moved towards a neoliberal model. 'Neoliberal policy reforms have sought to progressively replace centralist state grants with private loans-based tuition' (Newfield, 2021, p.78), which transfer the costs from the state to the student. Higher education is repositioned as a private investment for private returns, symbolised by standardised assessment measures of employability. Both the individual and institution are placed in competition to maximise their performance outcomes and exchange these for financial gain (Danvers, 2019).

Key points in this journey towards neoliberalism in England include the introduction of a privatised 'user pays' model through the introduction of 'top up' tuition fees of £1,000 from 1998; the introduction of 'variable' tuition fees up to £3,000 in 2006; the subsequent increase to up to £9,000 in 2012 — and the active stimulation of explicit competition between institutions for students' tuition income (Brown 2023, pp.9–11). Our work

suggests that an ethos of individualism and instrumentalism has permeated students' perceptions of the university experience, resulting in greater atomisation and disconnection. Many students, for example, described a pervasive pressure to develop personal credentials for employability, overwhelming their time or desire to build caring social relationships. While oral history testimony and archival research shows that campus loneliness pre-dates the neoliberal changes to higher education — indeed, students in the 1960s and 1970s gave voice to their feelings of isolation in student newspapers and magazines — the manifestations of privatisation and competitive individualism permeate contemporary accounts of student academic and social life offered in focus groups and photo elicitation interviews. Nowhere was this more evident than in students' acceptance yet discomfort with 'networking' practices, wherein caring social relationships with peers and staff are de-personalised and revalued as instrumental relations for private gain within the academic sphere. Approaches to understanding the consequences of neoliberalism and the ways these are *felt* by students should, we suggest, embrace interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary lenses, taking in the effects of top-down reform and the granular amendments that have shifted the psychological and structural landscape of individual institutions across recent decades.

Neoliberalism and the deficit of care

This neoliberal model has transformed the culture of the university for students. 'Performance has no room for caring' (Ball, 2003, p.224) and academic values of relationality, care, and cooperation become unthinkable, unsayable, and ultimately (im)possible. By extension, these principles 'get inside of us' (Ball, 2015, p.258) to change 'our subjective existence and our relations with another' (Rose, 1989, p.ix), subordinating care and compassion to individualism, competition, and performance. It is within this context that the (im)possibility of care and compassionate practices must be conceptualised.

Competition and the deficit of care

Both empirical and theoretical literature demonstrate that educational competition promotes conflict between individuals, undermining care and compassion (Phipps and Young, 2015; Waddington, 2019; Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020) by 'allow[ing] a particular

care-less form of competitive individualism to flourish' (Lynch, 2010, p.57). Indeed, where students and staff are conditioned by neoliberal principles to care for their own performance outcomes above others, adversarial social relations based on point-scoring and academic competition ensue, undermining caring relations (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020).

Inequality and the deficit of care

Academic competition presupposes and necessitates inequality which, in turn, elevates carelessness to legitimate the objective realities of the market. Indeed, 'inequality is not an unintended result, but is itself an important feature of neoliberal politics because it is supposed to serve as a mechanism to increase competition and productivity' (Becker, Hartwich and Haslam, 2021, p.948). Purposive inequality in assessment outcomes is quintessentially antithetical to the principles of caring and compassionate pedagogies in its disregard for the harmful consequences for the other. Previous studies suggest, for example, that Black students may internalise a perceived sense of failure and non-belonging for systemic academic inequalities beyond their control (Stoll et al., 2022). At the same time, educational inequality breeds carelessness for others, wherein 'disparities are seen as accurate reflections of differences in hard work and deservingness' (Becker, Hartwich and Haslam, 2021, p.1). In this way, neoliberal discourses of meritocratic competition have undermined efforts to recognise and support the disparate social contexts from which students join universities, and which shape their academic and social experiences.

Individualism and the deficit of care

In the neoliberal emphasis on performance outcomes, care for others is arguably inconsistent with the ideal self-interested, entrepreneurial, and self-improving neoliberal subject that is free from caring responsibilities which impede their capacity for academic outputs (Lynch, 2010). 'The ethic of care is pathological in neoliberalism' (Wrenn and Waller, 2017, p.1); caring relationships in our personal or professional lives are inconsistent with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and non-reliance on others that impede optimal assessment outcomes. In our work on belonging, for example, students consistently describe an underlying sense of academic competition and perceived surveillance that detract from caring social relations and care of the self. The

socio-symbolic value of assessment outcomes in neoliberal discourses of meritocratic competition fuse exam performance and personal value, wherein students invest all available time into individual performance at the detriment of the wider social experience.

Decentering grades and re-centring caring relations

These inconsistencies between compassionate caring relations and the neoliberal emphasis on individual competition require the development of alternative principles grounded in care of oneself and others. Ball and Olmedo (2012, p.85) propose that 'care of the self' in the neoliberal institution requires discursive acts of resistance that challenge the hegemony of competitive and individual assessment. We believe this must start by recognising and resisting these 'care-less' neoliberal principles of individualism, competition, and inequality that have coalesced and manifested in an undue emphasis on grades and outcomes among both students and institutions. We must instead speak a 'care-full' language that values diverse individual experiences holistically, the community collectively, and listens attentively to emotional and relational learning processes and needs. As Houlbrook has written, 'critical compassion in a strategic sense allows us to eschew neoliberal discourses and potentially create a counter-hegemonic set of ideas' (2022, p.192). To do so requires a strengths-based co-production of teaching and learning processes that build relational pedagogical environments and co-create a psychologically safe, culturally and emotionally responsive, and structurally accessible learning space. In practice, this means being transparent about the limitations of our knowledge, modelling a relational and emotional form of inquiry where 'failure' is normalised, learning is collective and collaborative, and diverse individual experiences are celebrated through and beyond assessment tasks. To do so is no easy task. We are all embedded in neoliberal discourses and practices that require 'care-full' critical reflection on our language and action in the neoliberal university.

Conclusion

We have argued that the (im)possibility of care and compassionate practices must be conceptualised within the neoliberal context of higher education. Drawing on a multidisciplinary lens, we propose the neoliberal principles of individualism, competition,

and privatisation have produced, and indeed necessitate, inequality, conflict, and a deficit of care — all of which are antithetical to compassionate academic processes. In doing so, we have sought to open up the conversation for ‘researchers to explore the potential tensions and contradictions between corporate capitalism and compassion to identify the organizational conditions that might give rise to compassionate organizing’ (George, 2014, p.13). In particular, where historical analysis shows us that specific policy choices have allowed competitive individualism to become a dominant discourse and way of being within the university, we believe there is scope for alternative policy choices going forward and space for a more humane and collaborative environment for students. As Killam (2023, p.46) writes, ‘to try and obliterate internalized and systemic neoliberalism would be frankly, impossible. Instead, recognizing it and naming it diffuses its dominance and makes space for all other humanness to flourish’.

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