

“Who Cares if I Care?” Facilitating Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

Being an academic practitioner for almost three decades, I am continuously enhancing my self-awareness, and developing strategies for addressing my, and student behaviour in order to eliminate the barriers to learning. By leveraging this awareness, I have focused on the facilitation of student engagement and learning, in order to create a caring and respectful learning environment.

The paper explores the literature related to the “caring” individual and behaviours which can either enhance or hinder student engagement during student/teacher interactions. By unpacking the inherent complexities in order to identify strategies that promote pedagogical care, a reflective narrative is provided on the personal learning gained while investigating this integral aspect of the student experience.

Finally, and, in an attempt to bridge the perceived gap, concluding thoughts and implications provide a synthesis between the analysis and the UK., Professional Standards Framework.

Introduction

As an academic in higher education for almost three decades, I am devoting substantial time and effort on curriculum development and knowledge creation, the latter of which informs and enhances the former. Within this context, and upon further reflection, it is evident (to me at least) that I am expected to deliver the curriculum, which is both cohesive and coherent, while the student will attend lectures, tutorials and workshops, engage in the requisite learning activities as she/he pursues the chosen field of study. The actual learning experience is impacted and influenced by both the student's and the academic's behaviour during the multiple interactions that transpire during the module or the course (Buttner 2004; Burton and Dunn 2005). During these interactions, the student is likely to form impressions about both the module and the course, and the academic. Her/his ability to assimilate the curriculum will be impacted by clues which are garnered from the academic, implying that the latter's behaviour, either intentional or unintentional, will influence the student's learning and subsequent academic success.

The academic therefore, has to become aware of, and to develop strategies for addressing these issues in order to eliminate the barriers to student learning caused via some awkward interactions. In addition, she/he has to leverage this awareness so as to better enhance student progress and success. Within this paradigm, the academic is charged with developing strategies which the student perceives as enhancing a caring and respectful learning environment (Noddings, 1984; 1992; 2003).

Following the review of a recent critical incident in my teaching practice, I explore the literature acknowledging that the behaviour of the teacher influences student learning; aspects of the "caring" individual and behaviours which can either enhance or hinder student engagement during student/teacher interactions. The next part of the paper attempts to unpack the complexities of this interaction in order to identify strategies that promote pedagogical care and respect. The penultimate section provides some

reflection on the personal learning gained while investigating, what I believe to be a sensitive and yet integral aspect of the student experience.

Finally, and, in an attempt to bridge the perceived gap, my concluding thoughts and implications for my practice, provide a synthesis between the analysis and the Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF, 2011), particularly those encompassed under “Professional Values” and “Areas of Activity”. Reflection and research-informed teaching provide the foundation for incentivizing students to “scale the heights” of learning, however grandiose and pompous that may sound. Consequently, an exploration of the “pedagogical care” literature in conjunction with the discourse on and around the neo-liberal, corporatized, higher (Blackmore, 2002; Giroux, 2002; Davies et al., 2006) education terrain, is an unavoidable element worthy of further study if one is to stay informed and thereby become a better practitioner.

The student/teacher relationship

During the spring semester of 2013 when students in one of my classes were delivering their presentations, at one point in the proceedings, in what I considered to be a rather light-hearted manner, I explicitly expressed my boredom at what I'd seen so far. The team-members involved in the presentation were obviously taken aback by the comment. At the end of the class, a member of the team returned as I was 'packing up' and insisted that I withdraw her from the module. It was evident that she was extremely upset by my comment and subsequent behaviour. I refused of course, but she was beyond consolation, as we parted on not very pleasant terms.

This incident touched me and caused me a great deal of thought and reflection. Up to that point, and for the preceding fourteen years as an academic, I had considered my behaviour to be both caring and respectful; the welfare of students was my first priority. For the duration of the semester, the particular student would ignore me whenever we passed in the corridors, and (fortunately?) she was never in one of my modules since the incident.

Since then, I have dedicated much thought to the issue of pedagogical care and respect as I have outlined in the preceding sections. Following up on

this, I collected data regarding teacher behaviours which exhibit care and respect, from a student cohort attending the 'Leadership Development Programme'. From a total of almost 400 students almost half responded to the following:

1. Have you ever had the feeling that a teacher did not care about you and your learning in a module/course?
2. What did the teacher do or not do to give you that feeling?
3. What did you do as a result of that feeling?
4. Have you ever had the feeling that a teacher did care about you and your learning in a module/course?
5. What did the teacher do to give you that feeling?
6. What did you do as a result of that feeling?

Almost one in three of the respondents had admitted to feeling as though a teacher did not care about their learning at some stage of their academic career, including comments such as:

“Never engaged a question or concern with any real interest, often answering questions I didn't ask or forgetting an issue related to the module no matter how many times it is brought up.”

“Not giving feedback.”

“The lesson felt rushed.”

In order to better understand the concept of “care” within the higher education terrain, and before exploring the students' comments further, it seems appropriate that an exploration of the literature is necessary. This may provide some enlightenment as to how best to create and nurture an environment which facilitates learning. Subsequently, the following section provides an overview of the pedagogical care literature.

The Literature

The “Looking-Glass Self”

Students form impressions about the module/course and the teacher, while their ability to study and assimilate the material is impacted by clues garnered from the teacher/student interactions, both within and beyond the

classroom setting. According to the early sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, it is a general human behaviour extending to all social settings (Cooley 1902; Howard 1989), and from which we develop our self-image through our interactions with others. Consequently, this self-image is not created just by direct reflection of our own personal abilities, but also from our impressions about how other people view us. This “looking-glass self” results from our social interactions where we envision how we present ourselves to other individuals such as, teachers, employers, family and friends, and then imagine how others perceive and evaluate us, for example, as being smart, extrovert and fun to be with, or dull.

These interactions enable us to formulate feelings about ourselves such as, respect or shame (Cooley 1902; Howard 1989), perceiving ourselves as both bright and intelligent, with an ability to study and achieve a commendable grade. Hawk and Lyons (2008) advise tutors to use caution during interactions with students, as the latter may be uncertain of their skills and competencies, leading to confusion and ultimate disappointment. Classroom interactions impact students’ self-image as they reflect on the teacher’s evaluation of their performance vis-à-vis their self-evaluation that they are intelligent, hard-working and capable, is either reinforced or rejected. Cooley’s “looking-glass self” theory has an important implication whereby perceptions about the self are not objectively formed by what others actually think of us, but from what our own impressions of how others perceive us to be. As a result, students may form false self-images based on incorrect perceptions of what others, such as teachers may think of them.

In a similar vein, Rosenthal and Jacobson’s (1968) experiments regarding the positive impact that teacher expectations can have on student outcomes have been validated and well documented (Jussim, 1991; 1992; Andrews et al, 1997). This self-fulfilling prophecy or “Pygmalion Effect” was based on students’ IQ test results reported to other teachers. Rosenthal and Jacobson informed the teachers that five students had recorded unusually high scores, and that these five randomly chosen, anonymous students would probably “outshine” their contemporaries by the end of the year. When the

class took an IQ test at the end of the year, all of the students had increased their IQ scores, while the scores of the five 'high achievers' had improved significantly more than the rest. Based on these results, Rosenthal and Jacobson concluded that the teachers' expectations impacted on their behaviour towards this student cohort, and which in turn resulted in improved, overall performance.

Caring and pedagogical respect (Hawk and Lyons, 2008) manifested in how others perceive us combined with how they behave towards us, is likely to impact our performance, and is the concept which is developed further in the following section.

Caring and pedagogical respect

According to Hawk and Lyons (2008, p317), and at the risk of stating the obvious, teacher behaviour, either intentional or unintentional, can influence students' academic progress. Subsequently, teachers, wishing to address this issue need to 'care about the learning of their students and must respect them'. Not doing so is likely to result in:

...lower levels of effective student learning, lower levels of course and instructor ratings by students, higher attrition rates in higher education and more jaded attitudes towards higher education and learning by those who do manage to make it through.

(Hawk and Lyons, p317)

Much of what transpires either in the classroom and other student-teacher interactions 'impacts the making of a common world of education...attained within the transactional curriculum' (Aoki, 1993, p261). In essence, the needs of each are different so that 'failure' on behalf of the teacher to recognise that the intrinsic value of learning can get lost, particularly when the student perceives that there is no connection between the material to be mastered and her/his lived experience. If the latter occurs, and according to Hatt (2005, p675) 'learning becomes meaningless, and being in school too often becomes pointless or only marginally important'.

On a personal level I was motivated to become an academic 'in order to make a difference' and Sonia Nieto's critique makes a powerful claim for teachers' motivation with her allusion to the significance of "love" as 'not simply a sentimental conferring of emotion. Rather, it is a combination of trust, confidence, and faith in students and a deep admiration for their strengths' (Nieto 2003, p16). Having interviewed a number of her colleagues she provides a lucid and insightful summary: 'These teachers demonstrate love through high expectations and rigorous demands on students and by keeping up with their subject matter through professional activities' (ibid). This then, is the manner in which caring for the other manifests itself within this cohort of teachers who must face a plethora of challenges within their profession. Commitment to teaching is driven by the need to be the best that we can be via pedagogical caring and the need to develop:

a repertoire of skills and dispositions that enhance the pedagogical relationship, a portfolio of pedagogical activities that offer guided participation and practice...to help our students become more competent in the content and skills of the course, more self-directed in their learning, more cultivating of the value of relationships, and more capable in modeling an ethic of care to others.

(Hawk and Lyons 2008, p325).

In affirming the aforementioned, Noddings (1984; 1992; 2003) and Rice (2001) defined caring as the process of helping the other person develop, and providing an accommodating context for her/him to grow in order to reach her/his full potential. The former's contribution to the field is significant, demonstrating that caring and caring relationships are essential aspects of education (*see a/so*, Smith 2004). Noddings suggests that the carer has to gain a better understanding of the person being cared for, and is essential if caring is to happen because the carer must first determine the other's personal and physical situation, in order to be able to decide on suitable action. In order to complete the caring circle, the person being cared for must recognize that the carer actually cares for her/him, and when this recognition occurs, caring is 'completed in the other' (Noddings 1984, p4). If the person

being cared for does not recognize that the carer truly cares, then the process of caring malfunctions and does not have the equivalent results.

Continuing her critique, Nel Noddings describes the concept of ethical caring, distinguishing it from natural caring where the latter occurs when a person engages in an act of caring because she/he wants to, for example, helping a friend out when this friend is in trouble, as an act of love. Ethical caring occurs when a person engages in an act of caring not because that person wants to, but because that person “must” care. In other words, a person would rather escape the effort and emotional distress associated with helping another person out and do something more pleasant and joyful, but nevertheless that person would act caringly because she/he judges that being caring is the right way to act in relation to other people. Natural caring is the base of ethical caring, which is a reflection of the ideal individual we want to be, while Lynch (2007, p554) is unequivocal in her assertion that, “being loved and cared for is of central importance for having a minimally decent life, and caring in its multiple manifestations, is a basic human capability serving a fundamental human need”.

Rice (2001, pp103-105) highlights two key aspects influencing learning, “a sense of belonging, and students’ perception of being cared for” concluding that “a teacher may be perceived to know everything about the subject he or she teaches, but if he or she does not act in a caring manner, students may report learning less from that teacher”. Hawk and Lyons (2008, p320) summarise the ethic of care as “a reflective and action-oriented process about learning of the other and demonstrating relationship behaviour that seeks to recognize, value, trust and develop the other”. Pedagogical caring therefore, involves aspects of an ethic of care:

The focus is on the development of the student as a caring human being and the student as learner and performer...one who needs to attain particular knowledge, gain skills, develop attitudes and dispositions, and demonstrate competence. Clearly, the instructor has the opportunity to model and exemplify caring behaviour.

(Hawk and Lyons 2008: 322)

In his recent commentary, Kindermann (2011, p307) suggested that:

Teachers need to (also) be experts in establishing relationships with students and in guiding children's developing social relationships. In many ways, this is the goal of making a focus on relationships a priority in the classroom. The act of relationship-building, in concert with offering timely feedback, supportive encouragement and treating the student with dignity, can become fundamental elements of pedagogical respect which can significantly enhance a student's development (Applebaum 1996; Hawk and Lyons 2008). Critical of the Kantian perspective that care and respect are incompatible, Applebaum unpacks Dillon's argument of the care-respect relationship informing us that recognition respect, one aspect of respect:

...needs to be dependent upon the valuable characteristics and traits of particular persons...[it] is due to all persons regardless of personal merit or excellence. Recognition respect is a fundamental aspect of care-respect. Not only must we recognize other persons as persons and give that weight in our action deliberations, but we must actively promote the other's good.

(Applebaum 1996, p82)

Clegg and Bufton (2008) found that students are able to distinguish the helpful, approachable teacher. According to the students, the teacher exhibits a willingness to recognise them as individuals and to care about their projects:

This is not about friendship or even unlimited time – students were very clear about the limitations and pressures on staff – but rather it comes close to the qualities Sennett (2003) theorises as respect.

(2008, p488)

With the need to provide feedback there's an implicit need for a mutually accepted relationship, of trust and respect (Price et al, 2010) which can be facilitated through the ethic of care. The student-teacher relationship can be enhanced via 'face-to-face' dialogue which "may influence the conversational space, generating more psychological openness to the possibility that each person has something valuable to offer, and is worth listening to" (Price et al, 2013, p45).

An investigation into the pedagogical care and respect literature must not ignore the potential and actual negative teacher behaviours as perceived by students. Academic research focusing on negative faculty behaviours that hinder effective learning has interested a number of scholars (Kearney et al, 1991; Farley-Lucas and Sargent 2007). Kearney and colleagues developed twenty eight categories of faculty misbehaviour, grouped into three dimensions, incompetence, indolence and offensiveness. According to Farley-Lucas and Sargent (2007, pp6-8):

Incompetence includes:

Going off topic; language differences and accents; lack of interaction; fixing exam questions during tests; focusing on irrelevant assignments; unclear assignments.

Indolence includes:

A general lack of professionalism; making noise in the classroom; using cell phones; inappropriate use of humour and jokes; apathy and ignoring students; personal quirks; lateness; eating and drinking in class; not dressing professionally; lack of preparation;

Offensiveness includes:

Put-downs; unreasonable or arbitrary rules; favouritism or prejudice; verbal abuse; sexual harassment.

These behaviours are likely to impact negatively on the student/teacher relationship with a subsequent negative impact on students' performance, including their self-esteem and their self-image.

This brief foray into the concept of pedagogical caring and respect will be unpacked in the next section where the discussion utilises some recent, as well as not-so-recent (but relevant) experiences of teacher misbehaviour as reported by students.

So What? Student Recollections

My exploration of the realities of pedagogical caring, unearthed a variety of examples where students perceived that there was a lack of care demonstrated by teachers.

One student admitted that a teacher just didn't turn up for the class, while several mentioned that a teacher would focus attention on students for whom the module was a core requirement; implying that those for whom it was an elective were treated with less respect. The fact that teachers did not have the time to provide additional feedback or assistance with issues of concern to students was frequently mentioned. Incidents where teachers would answer mobile phones during a seminar/workshop however infrequent can still be irritating for students.

In response to the aforementioned behaviours students are inclined to either seek help from others, such as peers and friends, or to seek redress via the university's student fora, e.g. course representatives; module/course leaders. Some illustrative comments:

"You grow indifferent towards the academic staff member and often lose trust, taking it upon yourself to do everything, often creating relationships with capable classmates and online research to keep up to date with the course."

"I sought help elsewhere."

"I did nothing, I was too upset."

At the other end of the spectrum, teachers go the 'extra mile' in order to help students assimilate the material. One respondent gave an example of a team of colleagues (who committed their own time) and provided access to laboratories, in order to enable students to complete assignments. Some further illustrative examples of positive behaviours:

"They engaged with me on a personal level...was aware of my strength and weaknesses...was able to create tasks for me in order to level out my ability in the module so that I may improve with a more solid understanding."

"They took time out of their day to go through with me things that I don't understand and gave me additional support in order to understand."

"Took time to research information about topics rather than just using a PowerPoint...emailed further information that wasn't readily available on blackboard to help with module...made themselves available for support out of hours."

“Put me in contact with the right people...made me believe I could achieve.”

“They class was full of experience and passion about what they were teaching.”

The preceding examples had a positive impact on the students:

“I was very appreciative of those people and find it much easier to remember what they taught and also feed my interest in the topic; during and after the module.”

“It gave me the urge to want to know more.”

“I have got lots of confidence, and made progress finally.”

“It enabled me to understand what was being asked of me.”

“Enjoyed the module the most out of all modules taken...put much more effort into the work and participated more in class. As a result it became my highest scoring module of that year.”

Unequivocal support for the literature is evident from the student feedback. It is evident that teachers who possess either a caring or non-caring demeanour will impact the learning experience of their students. Having established that this is likely to be the case, what does it mean for the teaching practitioner? I will endeavour to answer this in the following section.

Practising Pedagogical Care and Respect

Paraphrasing Brookfield (1999, p97), this is a selection of the questions that I frequently use for personal reflection:

- What have I learned about myself as a teacher?
- What have I learned about my emotional responses?
- What were the highest emotional moments?
- What were the lowest emotional moments?
- What activities gave me the greatest difficulties?
- Of everything I did this week in my teaching, what would I do differently if I had to do it again?

Consequently, the event described earlier from 2013, had a profound influence on “how I do things”, both within the classroom and outside as it

informs my interactions with students (and not only). Nevertheless, upon further reflection it would seem that I was suffering from the complacency borne of a managerialist terrain that has engulfed the higher education environment (Davies et al, 2006; Winter, 2009) and where the practice of care and kindness in our interactions, has been subsumed within the “Enterprise University” (quoted by Marginson and Considine, 2000, in Clegg and Rowland, 2010: 732). In the words of Lynch (2010, p63):

What is manifested in higher education now is a very particular and new form of carelessness. Care is only valued in the academy when it is professionalized. In itself this might not matter except that what has become defined as the pinnacle of all virtue, unbound work, is now making its way down the academic employment chain. Academics at all levels expect and are expected to work unregulated and long hours; it is part of their apprenticeship. To be a successful academic is to be unencumbered by caring.

This highly topical paradigm implies that concerted effort is required of the academic who aims to maintain a caring and respectful portfolio within her/his practice. In essence, this has meant that I make myself available on weekends and out of normal working hours in order to respond to student queries/emails related to their academic endeavours. In addition, my focus within the classroom is one of engagement as I ensure that by the second or third encounter I know the names of each student taking the respective module. The critical incident which has driven this assignment, highlighted the ‘cultural’ aspects of teaching and how we often take for granted that those with whom we interact will interpret either what we say, or how we behave in the manner in which we expected it to be received. I have since vowed to myself that this is not going to recur; the results of which were quite evident and profound.

Expending time to ensure that the learning outcomes are both cohesive and coherent, ensuring that there is constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999; 2002), can benefit students, particularly if revisited throughout the semester. For several years now, I have tended to focus less on content and ‘covering the curriculum’ and more on providing the framework so that the students

become competent at individual learning. Extensive use of workshops and tutorials, particularly as opportunities for one-to-one interaction is likely to facilitate this. Rust et al (2003, p161) suggest that:

In the context of today's higher education we must move away from sole reliance on the explicit articulation of assessment standards and criteria. To transfer useful assessment knowledge on which students can construct improved performance we must also involve the tacit domain.

They make a powerful argument for utilising workshops so that students have the space to 'practise' marking and assessing, of their own and others' work; while incorporating the use of exemplars facilitated a better understanding of the meaning and deployment of assessment criteria. A practice which was well received as illustrated by the improved scores that the students gained in subsequent assignments.

Utilising students' multiple intelligences (Barrington, 2004) is a coherent strategy for achieving this demand and includes the utilization of a variety of teaching and learning methodologies such as case studies, video clips, debates and discussions, group activities and presentations. Extensive use of 'blackboard' (or similar platforms) in order to share materials and ideas, including the incorporation of the course blog as a forum for extending this aspect of the learning, can be a powerful tool if utilised appropriately. Care must be exercised while using these tools/activities so as to ensure that all of the students feel comfortable and confident when they have to use them. Aspiring to become a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) in the pursuit of "excellent learning and teaching" practice (www.heacademy.ac.uk), affirmed that personal development is a perpetual activity and the risks of becoming complacent are many. Having been exposed to a plethora of learning experiences which I can then utilise in my practice, will enable me to cement the student/tutor relational dimension, in my quest to increase their engagement (Price et al, 2010); after all, isn't that what we want?

Concluding Thoughts and Implications

It is evident that the teacher who displays a demeanour of care can have a positive influence on learners, as illustrated by student responses in particular and the care/respect discourse in general. This is a cause for some concern. Scholars (e.g. Schuck et al, 2008) suggest that the UKPSF has tended to ignore the emotional and cerebral aspects of teaching and teaching practice. Perhaps these elements are implicit within the dimensions outlined within the Framework. Nevertheless, the time is ripe for a review of the meaning of 'teaching scholarship'; the rather unequivocal tone of Van Manen (1991) informed us that pedagogy, rather than being primarily a skill, is a virtue that shares much with parenting. An element, which I believe, needs to be at the core of the Framework acting as the glue which binds the other elements together into one cohesive whole.

While acknowledging that there are factors beyond the teacher's control and which make this "call to arms" somewhat whimsical, within the post-modern higher education environment where "regulation of the academy, of academic work, and of academic workers" (Davies et al, 2006, p319) has become irresistible, it is time to stress that we are more able to extend caring if and when we feel sufficiently cared for. We are less inclined to develop and nurture caring relationships if, within the university environment, we experience an impersonal bureaucracy where competition and political hubris override all else. Conversely, we are more likely to cultivate and cherish relationships with students and colleagues when our work is supported and respected within a caring community (Rossiter, 1999).

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