Conceptions of the caring teacher in higher education: A potential threshold concept that might support acts of activism and resistance

Julie Rattray[1], Anne L. L. Tang[2]

[1]Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom. [2]Lingnan University annetang625@gmail.com, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper reports the preliminary findings of a study exploring higher education teachers' conceptions of care. It considers the possibility that "care" is a threshold concept resulting in transformed approaches to teaching. Against the backdrop of the neoliberal university, we suggest that being a "caring teacher" constitutes an act of resistance and supports forms of activism. The paper will draw on the narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with university teachers from Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, who self-identify as "caring teachers". Interview data are complemented by the teachers' written narrative accounts of their experiences. Through the analysis, we will consider potential transformations in identity and practice that result from becoming a "caring teacher" and consider how such transformations might serve as an act of resistance against a neoliberal system, which is frequently characterised as devoid of care.

Full paper

Contemporary higher education is dominated by neoliberal discourse and policy contexts that have resulted in an increasingly managerial system. This system is driven by an audit culture and a need for accountability (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010; Olssen, 2021). This has resulted in a market-driven and authoritarian approach to institutionalising individual accountability, quantifiable performance measures, and audit-focused systems (Zepke & Leach, 2007; Olssen, 2021). Accountability is used as a rhetorical tool to convey an image of "good governance" and an efficient use of public money (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010). There is an increasing concern, however, about the extent to which any of these extensive quality assurance measures and performance reporting processes make a tangible difference to student learning and experience (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Stensaker & Harvey, 2010). Despite these findings, accountability is now a legitimised and well-established feature of contemporary higher education and arguably is being used to support what Macfarlane (2013; 2015; 2016; Macfarlane &

Tomlinson, 2017) refers to as a culture of surveillance and control that infantilises both academics and students.

The affective nature of teacher care is discordant with such a managerial system focusing, as it does, on accountability, quantifiable standards, and short-term measurable performance (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010; Olssen, 2021). Indeed "care" may well be discouraged in such a system as its short and long-term effects are hard to quantify and are frequently not recognised within neoliberal models of higher education. Consequently "care" as part of academic practice is discouraged in favour of other, more measurable, activities. Academics are encouraged to focus on high levels of productivity concerning research outputs and income generation, and to meet a clearly defined set of standards for teaching (Lopes & Dewan, 2014; Tett et al., 2017). Such activities, it is frequently argued, will result in career success and are encouraged and supported while "caring" for students is discouraged owing to its lack of measurability (Lopes & Dewan, 2014; Tett et al., 2017). This is in direct contrast to work that argues strongly that "care" is vital to the holistic development of learners and affords them a meaningful educational experience (Tett et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2019; Baice et al., 2021). The tensions stemming from the increasingly neoliberal culture within higher education have resulted in an erosion in academic autonomy de-professionalising them, and creating what Motta and Bennett (2018) describe as an ethos of "care-less" higher education.

Despite this, many university teachers believe that care is important and continue to persevere in embracing the notion of care, and their practices reflect this ethos (Tett et al., 2017). These teachers, however, may feel reluctant to discuss their approaches publicly and perhaps even demonstrate hesitation in aligning themselves with a caring identity even when their practices demarcate them as deeply caring teachers (Walker-Gleaves, 2009). This paper thus draws on data from university teachers who self-identify as "caring" to consider how care is being conceptualised and practiced within the neoliberal system.

The paper will present the results of our preliminary narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with university teachers who self-identify as "caring" teachers from Hong Kong and the United Kingdom. Interview data are complemented by an analysis of their written autobiographical accounts of becoming a caring teacher. This seeks to explore the development trajectories of teachers as "caring teachers" and consider how this has impacted their teaching identities and practices. We will also consider the position of "care" within contemporary higher education and its potential as a facilitator for activism and resistance. We argue that enacting care as a university teacher may initially be experienced as uncomfortable. Consequently, we utilise the threshold concepts framework (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005; 2006) with its focus on troublesomeness and transformation. We also contend that Noddings' (1984) concept of the ethics of care predicated on ideas of receptivity, responsiveness through engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity will facilitate acts of resistance against the dominant neoliberal culture in higher Education. We thus contend that the adoption of a "caring ethos" may be challenging for academics initially but once adopted the teacher cannot revert to an uncaring approach. Overall, we suggest that currently care might be acting as a form of resistance to the neoliberal system,

and argue that it has the potential to become a form of activism as conversations about care move from "backstage" to "frontstage" (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009).

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