

Compassion, collegiality and community: Connecting higher education with the human and non-human world

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Abstract

Collegiality has been interpreted as the respectful relationship between peers, the latter understood as those who are of equal standing with one another. The conference theme invites us to problematize whom we consider 'peers' and how a compassion-informed sense of collegiality is inseparable from a sense of respect grounded in deep regard for others' intrinsic value. In this paper I shall advocate for a notion of collegiality grounded in respect and true regard for others' freedom to flourish. Collegiality such conceived ought to inform not just the learning environments of students but extend to the wider communities in which universities are located, including the non-human and natural world. Through practices firmly rooted in such a more expansive sense of collegiality grounded in equal respect and true regard for 'others' (including fellow humans, non-human species and the natural environment), higher education may be able to promote human, community and ecological flourishing.

Full paper

For a long time scholars have argued that we live in a risk society characterized by unescapable unpredictability (Beck, 1992), that we are losing our planet (Bowers, 1993), and will witness intensification of systemic social injustices and inequalities, unless we change how and what we teach (Nussbaum 2011; Orr, 1991, 1994). We urgently need to pay greater attention to how we educate, and for what purpose (Bonnett, 2021). Notions of compassion, collegiality and community are central to such an endeavour.

In this conceptual study I propose that it is through particular types of learning, engagement and relationships grounded in collegiality and compassion (conceptualized as 'pedagogies of inquiry'), that student flourishing, and community and ecological flourishing, can be supported. Of particular interest are the 'being', 'knowing' and 'doing' outcomes, theorized as 'capabilities' or opportunities for well-being, which students can achieve through active engagement in various forms of critical inquiry into the key challenges of

our time. By providing students with genuine opportunity to attain these outcomes they are enabled to contribute to human, community and ecological flourishing.

In her capabilities approach, Martha Nussbaum (2011) suggests certain principles that a decent society, one grounded in respect or true regard for the intrinsic value and dignity of others, ought to be guided by. While she does not use the term 'collegiality', the idea that a society's commitment to social justice can be measured by the extent to which it affords each individual genuine freedoms to be able to be and do what they have reason to value, has been shown to be helpful for theorizing social justice generally, and student flourishing in and through education (e.g., Boni & Walker, 2013; Mtawa, Fongwa, & Wilson-Strydom, 2019; Murray, 2023; Walker & Unterhalter, 2006; Walker, 2006, 2010a, b, 2012, 2023; Walker & McLean, 2015; Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015). When the capabilities approach is applied to education, three types of questions are usually explored:

To what extent are students flourishing within educational environments? How does education enable flourishing of students in other parts of their life? How does education enable the flourishing of others (and we might extend 'others' to include not just other individuals but also communities and the non-human world)?

These questions are especially important if we hope to promote human, community and ecological flourishing through higher education. I propose that the employment of "Pedagogies of inquiry into the challenges of our time", has the *potential* to affect students' flourishing and integrity, and by extension, or *potentially*, the flourishing of 'others', including communities, and the non-human world. Importantly, although primarily concerned with human well-being and social justice, the capabilities approach also sparked significant debate and found applications in the fields of ecological, climate and environmental justice and environmental sustainability research (e.g., Ballet, Koffi, & Pelenc, 2013; Day, 2017; Holland, 2008; Peeters et al., 2015; Schlosberg, 2012). It makes sense, therefore, to explore how human capability is connected to the non-human world, and how through pedagogies of inquiry (i.e., a teaching-research nexus relevant to the needs of our time) we can affect human and non-human flourishing.

The capabilities approach is helpful when seeking to interrogate and reframe the notion of collegiality. Informed by compassion, the capabilities approach is grounded in the empathy we feel for the situation of others (Nussbaum, 1998). Not only is the capabilities approach itself informed by this emotion-guided notion of justice, but it also holds that the opportunity to develop such emotions ought to be a fundamental entitlement of any human being (and thus highlights the important role of higher education in this regard (Nussbaum, 2010)). I suggest that higher education should afford students the various kinds of 'capabilities' that allow them to thrive and flourish in higher education and at the same time motivate them to support and protect the flourishing of communities, animals and eco-systems. Higher education ought to place greater emphasis on relations (Taylor, 2017; Tutu, 1999), greater inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing (Nelson & Shilling, 2021) and other non-western traditions.

While I am especially concerned with how undergraduate education can lead to students developing a motivation and commitment to act in ways that support flourishing of others (including fellow human beings, communities, non-human animals, other species, and ecosystems), this all starts with supporting the flourishing of individual students within higher education institutions (Kahn, 2017; Murray, 2023; Walker, 2010). It is because of this close relationship between student flourishing *in* higher education and human, community and ecological flourishing *through* higher education that the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011) is an appropriate theoretical framework to draw on.