

## **Undoing Performativity. A Critical Praxis of Care, Compassion, Community and Inclusion in Academic Development**

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### **Research Domains**

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### **Abstract**

As Higher Education becomes increasingly global, fast-paced, and marketised, academics enter with diverse educational, professional, and cultural backgrounds, many unfamiliar with teaching, the UK context, or reflective pedagogical discourse. This paper embraces the 'compassion turn' (Dickson & Summerville, 2018; Waddington, 2018 in Waddington & Bonaparte, 2023), exploring how a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice embeds relational and compassionate pedagogies to support inclusive, reflective, and community-centred teaching. Drawing on Rossi (2023), Gravett (2023), Bovill (2020) Waddington & Bonaparte, (2024), the programme fosters belonging and critical development. Action Learning Sets offer time and space for dialogue, alternative perspectives, and collegial trust. Compassion is modelled through flexibility, presence, and inclusive feedback, supported by Spaeth's (in Waddington, K. and Bonaparte, B.2024) framework. Participants report embedding these approaches into their practice, creating ripples of inclusion. The paper argues for rehumanising academic development by embedding ALS, digital reflective tools, reclaiming space for care, connection, and resistance to performative cultures.

### **Full paper**

Neoliberal restructuring of HE has intensified pressures on academic staff defined by metrics, speed, and accountability (Ball, 2012; Burke, 2017). Yet, staff from diverse professional, educational and cultural backgrounds are navigating unfamiliar pedagogical landscapes. Supporting staff through inclusive and compassionate academic development is essential for individual growth and to foster institutional cultures of care.

This paper presents findings from a UK-based PGCAP programme that takes a countercultural stance, embedding relational and compassionate pedagogies. The programme supports staff in achieving Advance HE recognition while fostering inclusive, reflective practice. It responds to the 'compassion turn' in HE (Dickson & Summerville, 2018; Waddington, 2018 in Waddington & Bonaparte, 2023), which calls for reclaiming space for

care, community, and critical inquiry. Informed by Gravett (2023), Bovill's (2020) call for deeper relational pedagogies, and Rossi's (2023) inclusive design principles, the programme creates intentional spaces where educators can reflect, connect, and reimagine their roles. At its centre is a commitment to compassion, not just in content, but in the modelling of pedagogical relationships.

The theoretical framework draws on relational pedagogy (Gravett, 2023 & Bovill, 2020), inclusive learning design (Rossi, 2023), and compassionate academic practice (Waddington, K., & Bonaparte, B., 2024; Spaeth, 2024; Worline & Dutton, 2017). These traditions centre mutual trust, shared meaning-making, and ethical care in learning. Waddington (2018), Dickson and Summerville (2018) argue for care-oriented approaches as a counter to neoliberal isolation. The study also aligns with action learning theory (ALA 2024), where dialogic inquiry and peer questioning foster professional transformation.

A qualitative methodology was employed, drawing on written case studies and reflections, as well as ALS and other feedback. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method guided thematic analysis. The approach was underpinned by practice-based inquiry (Cousin, 2009) and action research principles (Kemmis et al., 2014), valuing reflective practice as legitimate data.

Participants described relational pedagogy as a lived, enacted practice. Compassion was modelled through non-hierarchical tutor-staff relationships, transparency in feedback, and presence. ALS created structured, dialogic spaces for peer-led inquiry. Participants raised teaching concerns and were met not with solutions, but open questions. For example, one educator's frustration about student disengagement and "laziness" evolved into a discussion on time poverty, mental health, and structural pressure. This shift reframed student behaviour and prompted pedagogical change. As a result, the participant rethought both the purpose and format of their sessions. Participants described the ALS experience as a rare moment of genuine collegiality, a space to "think aloud", share vulnerability, and find support outside of performative academic cultures. ALS thereby functioned as both a pedagogical tool and a collegial lifeline, creating conditions for "critical friendship" and honest conversation in a sector often starved of time and empathy

Facilitators enacted compassion and inclusivity through flexible deadlines, anonymity in digital reflections, responsive support and an inclusion-first design. These were not incidental but integral to the programme's ethos. Participants reported being "seen" and affirmed for their own multifaceted identities, often for the first time in their academic and educational journeys. Participants described ALS as a rare space for critical friendship and mutual support. Modelling of relational practice had tangible effects: participants embedded anonymous feedback tools, restructured assessments for accessibility, and prioritised student autonomy.

These findings echo Boud and Brew's (2012) and Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) work on professional learning communities as tools for disrupting individualised models of academic development. They also demonstrate how modelling inclusive pedagogy is itself a powerful pedagogical act.

The findings suggest that relational and compassionate pedagogies can mitigate the alienation and isolation many staff members experience in higher education (HE). Staff expressed that their experience of being valued and heard redefined their teaching ethos. Many implemented relational strategies in their own classrooms, seeing them not as extras but essentials. ALS will now be embedded across the PGCAP to sustain community and reflection, and further AI-reflective tools will provide accessible spaces for asynchronous reflection. These are not replacements for community, but scaffolds that uphold care in diverse forms, embedding care in structures, not just behaviours (Worline and Dutton 2017).

This programme deliberately counters dominant narratives of scarcity, performativity, and detachment. It offers instead a hopeful vision of HE grounded in compassion and connection. The call to embed such pedagogies aligns with wider scholarship on the ethics of care in education (Noddings, 2012; Zembylas, 2015).

This study shows how compassion-forward academic development is more than support it is resistance. It challenges deficit narratives, foregrounds human connection, and enables pedagogical transformation. As the pressures on HE intensify, reimagining academic development through compassion and relationality becomes both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity.