

Welcome to Episode 8 of Enhancing Academic Practice. I'm Chloe Corzine and today I'm talking to Dr Claire Loffman about compassionate pedagogy. So welcome, Claire. Thank you very much for having me. Thanks. So let's just get started with the main topic. What would you say compassionate pedagogy is? So it's about creating a learning environment in a way that notices if there's distress or disadvantage for all students and also staff and then tries to actively reduce that. That sounds a bit theoretical, doesn't it?

That sounds a bit theoretical, doesn't it? Put it like that. So it's the ways in which you notice in real time the barriers to learning for students and the ways in which you also notice for colleagues and staff, because compassion has to flow between colleagues and staff. It's not just all focused on students. So are you able to just give a couple of practical examples, given all your huge experience? Sure.

So for me, how I do it is to do with, first of all, reading the room. We've probably all been in sessions where sort of tutors come in and they've kind of had a very pre-designed set of things that they're going to talk through, maybe a little bit of death by PowerPoint. And they kind of come in and they just whiz through those things and there's kind of no human interaction really. And actually maybe half of the room is really distracted. They're waiting for some exam results or they're trying to sort out logistics replacement. And students don't really interact a great deal. So first of all, it's about reading the room. It's about creating chances to interact, to interact between tutor and students, but also for students to interact with each other. There's all the good work around reducing barriers in resources, and that can be through things like universal design for learning. That can be around just making sure that your slides and everything are accessible and that you've thought about the needs of the different students, if there are any learning support plans, when you've been setting up activities. It's also around representation, who is being pictured on your slides, are your slides reflecting the makeup of your student body across those protected characteristics around race, gender, etc. And then a lot of it is actually around scaffolding. So rather than just walking in and expecting a group of complete strangers to feel totally comfortable answering questions cold in front of each other, just acknowledging that actually we are all human. I'll always build in icebreakers.

I'll want students to have a chance to kind of relax into each other's company.

People just learn better when they are feeling less stressed, when cortisol levels are a little bit lower. And they can sort of sense, test ideas and talk about them with a colleague rather than putting people on the spot immediately. Yes, we'll do little pop quizzes and stuff on some of the content that people just need to know. But when it's ideas, it's much less stressful for students to have had a chance to talk to at least one other person, get a little bit of social reassurance, try out ideas, and then you can kind of come to different parts of the room to bring different voices in so that you don't get that effect that often tutors complain about. There's one or two dominant acting students and everyone else is silent. It's a really good way of getting away from that because actually what you're seeing, if you're finding that situation, is probably that people are generally feeling quite uncomfortable. And that the students who either, because they feel that no one else will speak or because they are really keen to speak themselves, you'll fall into this kind of repetitive pattern of quite quickly those voices will be established of some so being quite dominant and talking a lot or somebody being silent. So those are really interesting examples, Claire, and I think it links naturally to me anyway, so you know what the design days we're doing. When staff are needing to think about inclusive practice and wellbeing, these seem like natural things to turn to. Absolutely, yeah. And it's got a really strong, you know, the whole kind of the basis of the movement. It's got a really strong basis in psychology. So actually, the whole idea of compassionate pedagogy in the UK is

quite strongly influenced by Professor Paul Gilbert, but who came up with the Compassionate Mind Foundation. And that's compassion focused therapy, which is an answer to cognitive behavioral therapy, which is the idea that actually while CBT is used for people with depression and anxiety, it's sometimes that the limitation of CBT can be that people are just getting, you know, just analyzing their thought processes and actually criticizing the thought processes. And so Paul Gilbert was saying, actually, the intervention that's needed is compassion and self-compassion for people to notice when they're using that really harsh, critical way of self-talking. So then the idea when you're applying it in higher education, and Professor Theo Gilbert is in fact Professor Paul Gilbert's brother, and Theo Gilbert is the kind of a key proponent, main proponent of compassion focused pedagogy or compassionate pedagogy in the UK, HE. It's around sort of trying to practice and model educational interactions with students and between students in a way that helps them to develop compassion for themselves and others, and just to kind of, yeah, to treat people with compassion and interest at a humane level. So you kind of already started answering my next question then, but just why does it matter? Why should people be taking it seriously? Is it accepted? Is it something that they can feel confident in? Yeah, sure.

So I think a really key article was kind of in 2011, Richie Howe wrote a piece looking at the kind of barriers facing people who were first in the family to go into higher education and trying to explore how some of those barriers can be reduced in the classroom. And often that was around the type of activities and the type of reading list.

type of reading list. So it's been around as compassionate pedagogy, it's been around, what's that, 2011 to 2024, five, it's been around nearly 15 years known as compassionate pedagogy or compassion focused pedagogy. Of course, a lot of the ideas around sort of virtue and sort of ethical goodness in education, you know, they extend way back across, you know, Far Eastern cultures and Western cultures and the ancient Greeks. So those ideas aren't new and in terms of some of what was developed over the course of the 20th century, say something like, you know, all the ideas around how Maslow's hierarchy of needs relate to people's ability to learn. That kind of stuff isn't new, but the compassionate pedagogy or compassion focused pedagogy has been around for a good sort of 14, 15 years. There's been some great research, I mentioned Professor Theo Gilbert before, and, you know, some great work published, you know, in 2018 and around the sort of 20 teens around looking at the neuroscience of effective group work and how trying to enhance social interconnectivity before students, working on things like eye gaze, enhancing group work by getting students to share speaking time more equitably, getting, helping train students to be a little bit better at recognising voice tone, body language and doing some sort of peer regulation on group work. You know, that work has been coming out across the course of the last six or eight years. And, you know, has it been criticised?

And, you know, has it been criticised? Yes. So I think probably one of the highest pro-phoc criticisms was Joanna Williams in 2023. So she called compassion focused pedagogy, she calls it emotionally manipulative, a sensorious practice that is saying because compassionate pedagogy talks about distress, that it's pathologising students, it's actually encouraging people to think of themselves as victims, it disempowers them further. So while you can kind of see, you can see how you could get there from the, you know, that definition of talking about noticing distress and disadvantage, that's not what compassionate pedagogy is seeking to do. And some of the criticisms that came out in that article were of the sort of almost the kind of, you know, criticism of a generation of people, you know, that time snowflakes and like, well, I endured this, so why doesn't everyone else? But that kind of narrative actually ignores some of the privilege of the people who are saying that. And the fact that people are individuals. Yeah, people are individuals. And actually, if we know that there are better ways of learning, why wouldn't we want

the better ways of learning? So just because you endured something and it was unpleasant, it doesn't mean that, you know, every generation should have to go through that. So, for example, I think, you know, we were chatting earlier about some of the things we remember from our own university days and things like, you know, I certainly I never saw a grading rubric. You know, I enjoyed my undergraduate years.

I studied English at the University of Cambridge, and I felt tremendously lucky to do that. I never saw a grading rubric.

I remember once asking a tutor how I could make my essays better. And he sort of said, oh, well, at the moment, you're the moment they're a bit. And he sort of did this swirly movement with arms. And then he said, and what they need to be is this. And he sort of drew a square with his arms. And I wasn't really any further on in terms of sort of constructive communication. I wasn't particularly any further on. You know, I got a sense of I need a bit more focus. And you can probably see now I sometimes wish on a bit as well. And then things like, you know, when you went to get your results at the end of third year, those results were pinned up a lot across the sides of Senate House and they were pinned up in the order of the grades. So, you know, I started at the bottom and worked my way up on the basis that anything above a third was going to be good news. But, you know, there was a lot of there were a lot of crying students. And that was an I would say that was an unnecessary unnecessarily stressful and kind of punitive way of communicating performance to people. Yeah.

Going back to your example about asking the question that you didn't really ask.

Answer it. Yeah. You've asked the question for a reason. Yeah. You're now left confused. Yeah. So, you know, I think it's pretty easy to refute the negative comments made about compassionate pedagogy because it isn't just about turning everyone into a victim, is it? I mean, making sure that things are clear, making sure people aren't confused. Yeah. I can't see why that would be a problem. Yeah.

And and, you know, and there are also sometimes assumptions about the kinds of students, you know, particularly I happened to be a student who had English as the first language. If you were a student who had English as an additional language, if you were a student who had come from a culture where there was a much bigger power hierarchy differential between student and educator. You know, and you tried to ask that question that would have felt, you know, much worse, I suppose. So, yeah, it's really trying to think about clarity and how people can learn as effectively as possible. And if there are barriers and often barriers will be hidden assumptions, right? It's the things that, you know, a tutor stands at the front and thinks that everyone knows and they don't necessarily. And I've been teaching in higher education now for 14 years.

And there are a lot more things that I will say that I will signpost early on now. Even just simple stuff like, you know, I'm I'm Claire. I'm Claire Lofman. You're welcome to call me Claire at that level, because sometimes, you know, students, again, different cultures have different expectations around what you call the educator. There's anxiety for people that are all just little anxieties that when you add them up, they're actually just barriers to focusing on the content in hand and the spills in hand that we're trying to to tackle and things like actually getting people into groups, even something as simple as, you know, just mixing people up, you know, by even if it's just one, two, three, one, two, three, and getting all the ones, all the twos, all the threes. You've got some fantastic, you know, activities I know around like the sweets that they've picked and stuff, your little icebreakers, little ways of getting people to interact with other students in the room, to feel more comfortable, to relax, to feel able to speak in front of the students and to learn from other students. Because one of the key things is

actually that students appreciate that it's not just about this kind of close relationship between a tutor and a student, it's actually all the peer to peer learning opportunities that they have in the classroom with the other students and that sense of belonging, which is going to help with retention and success right as well. And just enjoying actually having friends and enjoying university, which particularly in the years following all the lockdowns, I think a little bit more scaffolding is needed for this generation around that because we are still seeing and hearing reports. You have a lot more struggles, people who are first years now, who are maybe 14, you know, during some of those lockdowns. That was a really crucial time in those social interactions, the development of those social interactions, where people had a very unusual experience. So if we're doing a little bit more to scaffold some social interactions with our students, we will probably only need to be doing it a lot more actively for the next couple of years, but it's something that's worth investing a little bit of time in. Yeah, and especially given how metric-driven we are now, so we know how important the National Student Survey data is, for example, postgraduate or experience survey. So anything that's going to help students feel accepted, welcomed. Yeah, a sense of belonging being really key and feeling heard by the tutor is going to be really key. I mean, you've already given loads of practical examples, Claire, is there anything you'd like to add to how people can do compassionate pedagogy? Yeah, absolutely. So I mean, I've talked, I've mentioned Theo's work, I've mentioned some of the kind of practical stuff I do in the classroom. There's that Richie Howe article, which obviously I can link to, that people might be interested in seeing if you're thinking more in terms of, you know, reading lists and materials. And that all sits, that's all part, again, of that sort of decolonizing the curriculum work and free errors, pedagogically oppressed. But then there's also actually this really nice strand around kind of mindfulness, which we've got some good work from our, at CCCU, our Director of Student Wellbeing, Community and Belonging, Dr Denise Meyer. So actually she's created some resources to help teach students about emotional regulation for learning. You know, we know this when it comes to kind of primary school learning, this is really strongly emphasized and to a great degree, secondary. But it's still really important when people are in higher education, they will often be experiencing a lot of different pools and pushes around work, around family, potentially around being in a new city and a new sort of new hall of residence or new accommodation. So actually trying to help students become more ready for the kind of adult emotional regulation of change, which is going to be a really big part of the classroom. So there are some interventions, like around mindfulness, meditation.

There's been some interesting work in Canada, actually, around the interrelations. This was in secondary elementary classrooms, but around teacher stress levels and student stress levels and everything at cortisol levels. And then introduced some mindfulness-based interventions, which actually had really positive results for both the students and the staff. And that was kind of focused on the idea of kind of awareness and compassion, which was, yes, promoting people's wellbeing, but also they were then in a better place to be able to learn. So you've already mentioned a number of other people do things. Would you like to highlight any other ways or resources? I mean, I can give a couple of links in the resources at the end of that. All right, brilliant.

So finally, I mean, what would you say is the main way compassionate pedagogy can make a difference to both you as, say, the lecturer and your students? I think it's about having time to see people as people, to be aware whenever you're with a group of students, to be aware kind of the number of obstacles people will have overcome just on a practical daily basis to be there, and how you can kind of best honor their time and presence, to work together to achieve the things that you're trying to achieve, and to enjoy the learning experience would be key for me. Yeah, and to not create bad memories, because something I always bring up with effective assessment feedback is, you know, what feedback do you remember? And people often

remember bad feedback, negative feedback, almost word for word. And so I think we have to understand just how much impact we can have on our students. Absolutely, yeah, I mean, any form of teacher has a huge degree of power. It's a very teaching in any form, it's very political, and we do have a lot of power. And, you know, however you dress it up, however you talk about it, there is always going to be a power hierarchy when you're an educator, when you're working with students, and sort of behaving ethically, you know, with that and trying to, I guess, in terms of like the medical, the Hippocratic, both sort of do no harm, first do no harm. I think that's, I think that's key.

And actually, you talk about the assessment, and, yeah, it reminds me as well, there have obviously been various strands to my work and the things that I've been able to do in the classroom, but then I'm also lucky, insofar as in my role, I have been able to be involved in some interventions that go beyond, you know, just my own classrooms. So one of the things that I wanted to do, when we need to revise the institutional grading criteria a couple of years back, was rephrasing the way that referred grades are discussed. Because some of the language, some of the ways that things were phrased, you know, made it made them sound really almost about the person rather than just the performance. And I would always try and stress, you know, it's a performance, you know, something may not be at a passing level yet, but that's that's one performance, what's the strategy that we can do, you know, to enhance that to approach that more effectively, the kind of, you know, the Carol Dweck, the growth mindset type approach that underpins that. So getting to have input on that level in terms of the institutional grading criteria has been really good. Also things like, you know, now that learning teaching enhancement, we've got the module and course handbooks, trying to make those just as documents more accessible. And, you know, and being able to talk and draw on the expertise of colleagues across the university around ways in which those can be more accessible, whether you've got dyslexia and dyspraxia, whichever kind of barriers you may be experiencing. How can we try and reduce the stress that is sort of there in institutional documentation, because that's part of the lived experience of your students. For most students, it's the human interactions with students and the educator, and it's the documents and emails that are coming, kind of official documents and emails that are coming from the university that shape so much of the student experience of the culture and life of the university in studying. Well, it's interesting because it starts off sounding like it's quite a niche area, but when you actually think it through, you realize it underpins everything. And also, it's made me realize that it doesn't have to be for someone who's a snowflake or needs special needs. I mean, why wouldn't you want the handbook to be clear for everybody? Yeah, absolutely.

And it's because it's also, it has a real power in terms of moving forward in society, because if you experience documents that are really challenging to read and are quite obstructive, whether or not you actually, maybe even more, if you yourself do not have dyslexia, you know, you might not think about it, you might not really be aware of it. And then when you see resources that are, and you enjoy engaging with them, and perhaps you have friends who comment on how, you know, it makes it easier to read for various different reasons, whether it's English traditional language, whether it's visual impairment, whether it's dyslexia. It's meaning that hopefully that next generation are going to be a little bit more aware of some of the, you know, how to put into practice the kind of 2010 equity considerations in the workplace as well. Because we want a fairer, more compassionate society, right? It's not just about what's happening within the university.

It's not an ivory tower. It's crucially linked to the local community. And yeah, to the life of our town and beyond and our county and beyond the wider world. Well, that's great.

Well, that's great. Thank you, Claire. Thank you very much. So thank you for listening to this episode of Spotlight on Best Practice. And please do explore our other episodes on Spotify and look out for links and transcripts on the web page. Thank you.