

THE CASE FOR COMPASSIONATE CARING FOR THE WELL-BEING OF OTHERS, THROUGH PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING, AN AZERBAIJANI PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. The Covid-19 pandemic has offered some hope for permanent positive changes, especially for the emergence of the disposition to care, not caring practice, but a normative disposition of care. That is to say ontological care is not just caring practices, which can, although not necessarily just be enacted, say in role play in the world; teacher, doctor, nurse, mother, father by is a way of being. Moreover, this means that an ethic of care presented as being concerned with actions and not just intentions, which make no sense for care as a moral imperative. In this paper, this distinction is explored in the context of problem based learning in Azerbaijan.

Keywords: *Compassionate, care, well-being, problem-based learning, PBL, Azerbaijan.*

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1. Introduction

Higher education is being sought by growing numbers of students whose ambitions are various. At core there seems to be an economic imperative rather than caring about those who make up the higher education community and beyond (Gibbs, 2017). The neoliberal consensus on the necessity of market capitalism has led to the dominance of rights and duties around choice, independence and personal achievement, as well as competition, selfishness and the pursuit of profit, status and power. Construing the purpose of the university primarily in economic terms limits a wider contribution it can make as a social institution to framing and forming futures (eg Barnacle and Dall'Alba, 2012).

Perhaps worse, in the author's opinion, is the objectifying of entities, such as students being treated as objects. This tends to fuel negative feelings such as resentment, which may develop into mental health issues. Indeed, more and more students are reporting mental health challenges and seeking support (Rautela *et al.*, 2024). There are several underlying factors, including financial pressures, uncertain future career prospects, widening participation and an increased awareness of the signs and symptoms of mental health difficulties. This has highlighted a concern for the mental health and wellbeing of university students throughout the world.

This is clear from a growing academic literature from Azerbaijan. Examples are Aliyev and Agayeva (2019) on hopefulness and Isaeva *et al.* (2023) on engagements and

a supportive student environment. It is also emerging in curricula and pedagogical development. Sattarova et al. (2021) discusses this in paper on how problem-based learning (PBL) can improve student self-development towards openness to new possibilities. PBL approach as a tool can support academic community to support youth in developing their academic and soft skills without direct pressure on individuals. On other hand, it has its fruitful results both at Western world, but not only Sattarova et al. (2023; 2020). Scholarly work is contributing to growth in well-being for academics and students. However, they are dealing with symptoms, not the malaise. We propose two alternative ways of addressing these problems.

2. Legislation or Morality

2.1. The Legal Option

One way of dealing with these issues is to have a statutory duty of care, giving universities the legal responsibility to care for adult students. This would be akin to universities' existing duty of care for employees and students under the age of 18 and for the sector to voluntarily ensure consistency in pastoral care towards students and this is currently under debate in the UK. In current English law, schools and colleges whose pupils are mostly under eighteen have a legal duty of safeguarding. It is not the same for universities, which have limited duties of care to ensure that students have a safe environment where they can live, work and study. This provides only limited protection from harm as a result of negligence where harm was reasonably foreseeable. There has been a call from parents to improve this, but so far, the government is resisting

For me, this opens more than a legal argument. It brings into question the purpose of the university, the nature of academic life and the role of academics and administrators and their capacity and capability to act. What is needed and proposed here, is a radical revision of the university relationship with those at the centre, focusing on their community's well-being through care and compassion. Parfitt et al. (2021) powerfully echo this point, writing that "to carry compassion forward into the post-pandemic university, taken-for-granted individualism and self-seeking behaviours have to change and a new stance towards our relational selves be adopted". This has an impact on what a university ought to be and we would like to discuss this position.

2.2. The Care, Compassion or both Options

The second option is more fundamental and concerns caring and compassion and will argue that caring does not have to be compassionate. It can be functional, as it is when it is a legal obligation. This may be the case with our nurses, doctors, social workers, lecturers, students and administrators if there is a normative response to caring. One that relates to prescribed norms, whether presented from a legal or an ethic viewpoint, is limited if it is conceived around perfunctory actions.

Compassion expands on caring; it gives it a grounding. It gives rise to altruism, generosity and kindness to others (and to oneself). This naturally brings better social connectedness.

Given that care and compassion need not be mutually exclusive and indeed, are usually better when they are aligned. But they can be separated and still make a positive contribution to caring for others. This leads to three possible states:

(a) A person who cares, that is contractually fulfils the task defined as caring but may not act in a compassionate way.

(b) A person who does not care in the way defined above, but may act compassionately.

(c) A person who cares compassionately.

Today, we will explore the optimum option - (c) - as we believe that compassion has in many contexts; Islam, Buddhism and aretaic (virtue) excellence and is the pivotal position worthy of providing moral guidance. On this premise compassion becomes central to the social and political institution of higher education. It includes traits such as honesty, bravery, generosity, temperance, kindest intellectual curiosity and thoughtfulness. This is not new, the renown Azerbaijani philosopher and poet Nizami's (Berthels & Herzig, 2016) discourse is consistent with this when he advocates a practical morality which seemingly reflects his literary motif of Sakhon. This informs action through philanthropy and kindness toward people: In the Treasury of Mysteries, a few examples.

- The help of friends is a great solace to the wretched who is vanquished by grief (570);

- A hundred of his sorrows will vanish, when for a moment he is warmed by friendship (571);

- The seed of generosity gives sure harvest. When it ripens, it gives a provision for the day of judgment (1887);

- They will open the same door of kindness and tenderness to thee, as thou opens" (ibid:2124).

3. Which is compassionate, leaping-in or leaping-ahead

These way of being in a world are achieved through the emergent, pervasive and fundamental moods* (to use a Heideggerian term) a central and perhaps even governing one being compassion. It is the way of being that ground care as compassionate. For Heidegger (1962) "Caring is always which concerns concern [by which he mean practical engagement with the world] and solicitude [one's relationship with others], even if only privately". The concern aspects of caring for Heidegger is practical and ontic; it is ethical whereas the solicitude in ontological and moral (I will return to this shortly). With this understanding Heidegger goes further and argues that "[C]are is the basic mode of the being of existence and as such it determines every kind of being that derives from the ontological structure of existence" (1962:185).

Heidegger, goes further and helpfully describes caring for others as either 'leaping in' (*ibid:158*) and 'leaping ahead' (*ibid*). Where:

- Leaping in' is when, out of concern, a caregiver takes over another person and solves the problem on the other's behalf. This, as Heidegger describes it, is our ontic view.

- Leaping ahead' is the person receiving the 'leaping ahead' type of care experiences freedom, increased meaningfulness, new insights and consequently feels more fully human. This is our ontological view.

Elley-Brown and Pringle, considers that "[A]lthough both are positive, leaping in makes the person dependent and dominated. Leaping ahead is enabling and the person

* Using mood as an Heideggerian concept which is the fundamental way in which we are open to ourselves and our world. It is how we disclose ourselves.

receiving care gains meaningfulness” (2019: 27). Further, Verdera (2019) suggests that in leaping ahead, caring must originate in the needs stated by the person receiving the care, either expressly or through their behaviour, it should not come from needs inferred from financial, cultural or any other types of demands that try to direct the work of teaching. This requires spaces in which our care flourishes and is provided for the self as it is presented to students and staff. It is where, according to Clouston (2018), academics “embody their own caring values in terms of care and compassion toward the student body and their colleagues”. And where, Herring (2017) suggests that caring involves meeting the well-being needs of another “in a way that respects them as a person, which involves acknowledging the responsibilities that come with caring and which must be understood in the context of a mutual relationship” (ibid, 2017). He continues “compassion and care are closely linked, but most understandings of care will primarily focus on activities, rather than motivations, while most understandings of compassion primarily focus on emotions leading to care” (ibid).

Once care is adopted as an ontological reality, complete autonomy is revealed as illusory. This emphasises the importance of the relational and creates caring environments which support all individuals in meeting their caring needs. In this sense compassion is a deep concern for the well-being of others. It is a dialogue which is deeply explored by Buber to whom we turn.

4. Understanding Compassion as Caring Dialogues

Buber, in his *I and Thou*, argues that humans engage with the world in two ways:

(1) ‘I’ is seen as an ‘It’, creating a separation, a standing apart or an objectification of beings as objects to be experienced or used.

(2) The attitude to ‘I’ moves towards a ‘Thou’, where the self enters into real relationships with other people or nature, through dialogue. Listening is a crucial part of true dialogue. This presents as: “I lived continually in the relation with man, which is bodied forth in dialogue” (1950:65).

Moreover, such genuine dialogic is at the core of a transdisciplinary viewpoint. It requires bravery.

“Respondo etsi mutabor” - I respond, although I will be changed.

This sentiment is at the core of genuine caring in agency. It entails “a risk, the ‘danger’ that by truly listening to the other, one might, indeed, be changed, transformed cognitively and existentially” (Mendes-Flohr, 2015:3).

Here, we see the subjects as individuals in need of care, not as members of a homogeneous student community, but as individuals whose similarities and differences are important in our recognition of them. We listen to their world views and do not filter it through our own. This is one of the requisites that will be suggested later for a pedagogical practice (Gibbs, 2024) and especially for PBL approach.

5. Personal Moral or Normative Ethical Issue

A morality of compassionate care implies that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life. Dependencies are revealed through attending to the vulnerable, as they, the vulnerable, are individually perceived. In this context, care ethics seek to maintain relationships by contextualising

and promoting the well-being of caregivers and care-receivers, in a network of social relations.

This approaches the realities of the singularity of the vulnerable person, not the impartiality derived from a Kantian duty of care or the statutory requirements of care. This is not an ethic of empathy, but of difference. The premise of impartiality in the universal Kantian imperative (and also utilitarianism) is, as Ferraresse (2021) suggests, no more than a “fetish of generality which is a powerful mechanism of indifference to others”. It is “a rhetorical tool used to confer legitimacy on a homogenising ethical viewpoint grounded in abstract duty (*ibid*:18). Further from a feminist perspective care ethics being “inattentive to the needs of others constitutes a moral failure” (Brugère & Tronto, 2019). Thus a simply ethical approach, treating care as an abstract duty, will quiet the voice of the individual who suffers. Compassionate care emerges from empathy and desire for the well-being of others and can lead to the compassionate themselves being vulnerable.

Respecting diversity, equality and inclusion is about understanding vulnerability in the process of change and its unexpected consequences. It is also about merit and recognition, of the talented, but not at the expense of those less able.

Compassionate caring cannot be contracted or legally proscribed and so defies statutory enforcement, caring might be and can be facilitated by organisational structures and procedures. This essentially transforms care into functionality within a legal entity under statute. The best it achieves is a culture of ‘leaping in’. Another way is to leap ahead, through listening and responding to the becoming of those under our care. This type of care takes us all beyond vulnerability.

Holding such a position requires considerable moral courage as well as creativity to change the hegemonies within the university, affecting its position in society and politics and radically changing the power structures that pervade contemporary institutions. The new ethos would directly affect the type of attention to students and the wider community as a moral agent. Heads of universities would no longer focus on barriers to engagement with others to retain their competitive positions. Instead, their focus would shift to in-depth and authentic collaborations. One example of this is the Student Flourishing initiative at Emory University in the US. The initiative helps students get the most out of their time at college by supporting them in four pillars: academic experience, community and wellbeing, purpose and meaning and professional pathways.

6. Higher Education

The purpose of education should be to engage the flourishing potential of the student and the faculty. In these complex and uncertain times, that we need an ethos of compassion, to be infused into institutional cultures and practices in the Heideggerian sense - disclosing at a deeper level than the simply functional or ontic experience of care; not leaping -in but leaping-ahead. The care should be compassionate and authenticity, not the totalisation of oneself or the others and this is achieved through a compassionate grounding.

For me, this opens more than a legal argument it a moral one where compassion is the central force. Of course, it brings into question the nature of academic life and the role of academics and administrators. What is needed and proposed here, is a radical revision of the university relationship with those at the centre, focusing on their community’s well-being through compassion. Here, Parfitt (2021) the recently deceased American

philosopher, powerfully makes the point, “to carry compassion forward into the post-pandemic university, taken-for-granted individualism and self-seeking behaviours have to change and a new stance towards our relational selves be adopted”.

As an initial step we need to employ more scholars than academics. We have made this distinction at length before (Gibbs *et al.*, 2024). In brief, academics need to be competent in academic tasks and be practitioners whose engagement extends to the limits of their contracts. Scholars take this further, exceeding those limits in care and compassion, belief and action. Their vocation is the love of their work and for the common good. This requires scholars to be trustworthy when they speak out, to reflect on their own propensity for self-deception and to be courageous. We want to suggest and have done elsewhere (Gibbs *et al.*, 2024) that this is where scholars rather than academics are dominant in a university community. Philosophically, we might frame academics as having an *ontic* approach to caring and indeed their work, while scholars have an *ontological* mood - not just caring just because it is best practice, but as a way of being. This means caring is companionate for the well-being of others as individuals, recognising where those individuals have needs and vulnerabilities, as well as recognising their own.

To be clear, I advocate against overly uncritical positive approaches to addressing the nature of compassion in higher education. Compassionate caring needs to be critical as well as positive. That approach in the cultures of universities enables relational pedagogies to thrive. For example, we might confront forms of academic assessment and pedagogical practice developed for a distinctive set of skills and abilities, such as gender or ethnicity. These may alienate others with different ways of revealing their being in the world. To hear the other directly we need to provide more than an example of ‘a student’. There needs to be space for self-expression and self-identity. We need a unified and distinct entity which is fluid and complex in its own right. Caring for students’ well-being, both within their academic lives and their external circumstances, has a proven impact on how students respond to the institution, how well they take on their responsibilities to study and their own authentic responsibilities as social actors. The impact on curriculum and assessment would bring into context the societal and political goods needed for communities to flourish and focus on societal solutions to problems. It would help students to become more critical of the world and encourage them to act (Sattarova *et al.*, 2023). Research would be more focused on the ‘good’ needed for all in societies, approaching altruistically major issues facing humanity, with a focus and credo of social justice. Such action may be evident in many universities and where it occurs, this is clearly positive.

This compassionate caring is emergent, is existential over time and space it requires becoming compassionate. We suggest, which ought to be woven into the fabric of the university ethos. If we compassionately care, we don’t need to frame people in terms of deficits; we expect to cultivate the compassionate. Making people feel inadequate and incompetent is a wasted and corrupting behaviour. Scholars need to care authentically. We need to find time to recognise our needs and those of the vulnerable. In doing this, enacting care becomes an intended practice of caring.

Within the university there is a need for a genuine morality, where a student-centred pedagogical ethos seeks to facilitate, at different levels. There is sameness in terms of collective cooperation (in that students choose to become forms of engineers, physicians, teachers, artists, etc.). And there is the way in which students might generate their self-identity, as they perceive it, in their individual ‘becoming’.

7. Problem-Based Learning

One practical example where compassion can be practiced within the context of learning is in more participative spaces and temporal flexibility. A recognition that power, positionality and respectful participation is at the core problem-based pedagogy. This is a pedagogy that invites a space for thinking together. It takes a compassionate stance if its aim is to transform students and lecturers, as well as the educational institution, together with the communities they serve. PBL can release individual potential and although may not go as far as Jørgensen (2024) who suggests that a “PBL scholar cannot accept the standardisation of curricula that we are experiencing in education”. It can however facilitate an institution’s emergence as compassionate. Such change is risky. Compassionate makes the Jeopardy worthwhile. For without it, openness decreases while resistance and boundaries emerge to protect the culture of ‘leaping in’ as opposed to ‘leaping ahead’. This ensures control and blunts ontological learning and would suggest the furtherance of democracy.

PBL has been widely adopted in diverse fields and educational contexts to promote critical thinking and problem-solving in authentic learning situations. This recognises the importance of affect and how that impacts learning, humanising, caring and pedagogies. Indeed, compassion is central to much of the published research of PBL. This is applicable to all contexts, but especially where it is most reported, in the healthcare sectors and it is from here that offered an example.

Using PBL experiences offers valuable insights into how education can shape compassionate and socially responsible individuals. The example below is borrowed from midwifery, where PBL has provided this opportunity to explore collective knowledge and understanding in a structured setting. This case is a little dated, presented by Phipps et al. (2015). Thus, PBL might better support students in developing the competencies and skills they need but currently lack and address the weaknesses of the teaching methods.

During this process, students often reveal anecdotal and tacit knowledge through birth narratives and self-disclosure of personal experience. This can be highly emotive, for example when discussing pregnancy loss, disability, relationships and domestic violence. These need the expression of kindness, care and compassion. Working alongside each other, midwifery students demonstrate empathy through ‘being with’ each other. They are able to empathise, care and understand their colleagues’ experiences. This includes developing necessary competencies which align the market needs as well. Such as group work, out of box and critical thinking, self-learning and research skills. The serious step might be to go out from tutor-centered learning to student-centered learning and ‘being with’ are demonstrated. The group can capture these skills and develop emotional intelligence through the recognition of collective feelings and emotions. They can use their experience of intelligent kindness to guide their thinking and action in practice. This mirrors what is required in clinical interaction where clients are needy, fearful or distressed.

Clearly, this approach to higher education requires more than skills of teaching and knowledge generation. To our knowledge, PBL might also be an example of something that is not very close to traditional/classical Pedagogy and Research. It is some kind of broader, which helps to create a very different environment that helps to develop many skills, such as self-surfing, collective work and accepting individuals with their uniqueness (Sattarova *et al.*, 2023). The transition from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach requires not only significant institutional support, including faculty

training, but also cultural change within the academic community itself. It requires a mood of compassion and to encourage this, institutions should implement policies to nurture diversity and develop the individuality of each student and demonstrate that the feeling of being treated as a valued individual prevails throughout the university. PBL offers an approach where compassionate participants learn existentially as knowledgeable, empathic and even spiritual member of a community of learning. Now whether we want to reshape our institutions to facilitate such an ethos and is debatable we acknowledge. We need to think if such a moral guidance for:

- Can compassion vanquish injustice competitiveness?;
- Should universities only employ scholar demeaned compassionate?;
- Can compassion lead to a widening of opportunities for students?;
- Can compassionate dialogues really blossom through the PBL approach?

8. Conclusion

Consequently, there is a serious risk of breaking the link between generations and creating a lost generation, which has to replace the scholars. We believe that this observational case study will contribute to the global education research community by offering insights that shape policymaking and applications.

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