



Practising vulnerability; presuming equality: towards a pedagogy of care

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the concept of vulnerability as a cornerstone of caring and compassionate pedagogies in higher education. Drawing on recent feminist thought, I examine how relational pedagogies and ontologies of care can challenge the marketised conceptualisation of student–teacher relationships. I argue that practising vulnerability, when understood non-instrumentally, has the potential to foster more emancipatory classroom environments. I critically engage with the notion of vulnerability, positioning it as a practice of trust and an assumption of intellectual equality. I contend that vulnerability resists instrumentalisation and instead attends to students in their specificity. I reflect on my experiences of practising vulnerability in teaching, emphasising modest yet effective approaches that acknowledge intellectual limits and speak from situated standpoints.

Whilst recognising the risks associated with vulnerable pedagogies, particularly for marginalised individuals and precarious staff, I maintain that some degree of vulnerability should be central to caring pedagogies. I argue that practising vulnerability can rebuild trust between students and teachers, even in challenging material conditions. Ultimately, I posit that practising vulnerability, though often a modest gesture, has the power to maintain liberatory spaces in universities. I conclude by asserting that this approach can keep alive ways of imagining teaching and learning as a celebration of situated, everyday practices of care, fostering emancipatory learning communities.

Keywords: vulnerable pedagogy; relational ontology; feminist care ethics; higher education marketisation; intellectual equality; student–teacher trust.

Introduction

How might care play a role not simply in pushing back against the marketisation of higher education, but in fostering emancipatory forms of education? How can caring pedagogies be put to general use when care necessarily refers to a specific, situated relationship? In what follows I explore the way care and relationality have been conceptualised in some instances of recent feminist thought, drawing on the pedagogic scholarship of Karen Gravett and colleagues to reflect on how caring relations can challenge dominant ways of articulating the student–teacher relationship in a marketised higher education environment. More specifically, I outline a practice of vulnerability and argue that when this practice is properly understood as necessarily non-instrumental, non-scalable, and non-generalisable, it has the potential to locally manifest more emancipatory ways of being in the classroom. I briefly discuss some of my experiences of practising vulnerability in my teaching, the implications of its situated, non-generalisable nature, and some of its potential risks. Although practising vulnerability can — and often should — be modest, I conclude by arguing that its assumption of equality and the trust that stems from this have a radical potential: the sense of an emancipatory learning community to come, that has, nonetheless, already been here.

This paper is concerned with approaching a pedagogy of care which, in this instance, is orientated around the practice of vulnerability. As a consequence, the ‘towards’ of the subtitle, more than just a rhetorical flourish, is doing important work: it signals that a pedagogy of care may never finally be arrived at, not because it is impossible, but because, as I will go on to argue, care necessarily exists in and as its localised instantiations, refusing any generalisation as ‘the’ or even ‘a’ pedagogy of care.

Relational pedagogies and ontologies of care

It matters that care has been formulated as part of feminist discourse since, as is well known, in a patriarchal world caring and care’s labours are sequestered from men and the masculine and disproportionately fall to women and the feminine. Caring is a tending, a paying attention, a looking after. Consequently, care cannot be meaningfully isolated: it is properly of or for another person. Care is, in this sense, relational. Nonetheless, as the members of the Care Collective note in *The Care Manifesto*, in recent decades collective,

socialised forms of care have been displaced by self-care, 'something we are supposed to buy for ourselves on a personal basis' (2020, p.3). This, the Collective argue, precipitates a world where 'carelessness reigns' (2020, p.1). Nonetheless, while the stereotype of the world that I live in (the West) makes care women's work, care is, rather, essential for everyone's existence, practised and received by all sorts of people, even if it is disavowed within the logics of dominant expressions of masculinity. The Care Collective states that care must:

be distributed in an egalitarian way — neither assumed to be unproductive and primarily women's work by nature, nor, when paid, carried out mostly by women who are poor, immigrant, or of colour. The goal is to ensure that the whole of society shares care's multiple joys and burdens (2020, p.19).

Feminist and other traditions of scholarship have also centred care and relationality when reflecting on questions of pedagogy. For example, Martin Compton and Rebecca Lindner have proposed a 'pedagogy of care (hu)manifesto' that pushes back against 'highly pressurised ways of working and being that are common in higher education' (2022, n.p.).

Karen Gravett, Carol Taylor, and Nikki Fairchild also insist on centring caring relations in our education, 'positioning care and response-ability as a central feature in an expanded conceptualisation of relational pedagogies' (2021, p.390). For Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild, 'relational pedagogies position meaningful relationships as fundamental to effective learning and teaching and explore ways of fostering connections, authenticity, and responsiveness' (2021, p.392). In particular, they situate their thought in relation to recent post-human feminist theory that insists on recognising the way people are enmeshed in the particular spaces that we inhabit, the particular relationships that we form, and the particular ecologies that we are a part of — including not only human relationships but our necessary relations with 'more-than-human' life (2021, p.393). This is a notable contrast to Compton and Lindner, for whom the first principle of their (hu)manifesto is to 'humanise things!' (2022, n.p.). Despite this tension, what both sets of authors share is a recognition of the dehumanising effects of the contemporary university and the role care may play in remediating this.¹

¹ Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild centre the more-than-human in their analysis, joining a chorus of interventions from other feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway (2016), Karen Barad (2007) and Rosi Braidotti (2013). While interesting and important, the question of the more-than-human is not taken up in this paper, and nor is the question of whether dehumanisation necessitates rehumanisation — or, more

At the heart of Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild's argument is a contestation of particular ontological presumptions of what it is to exist as a student or teacher — and underlying these presumptions, what it is to exist per se. We might ask, 'what is proper to being a student?' or 'what distinguishes a student from a teacher?'. Even if we have never asked these questions, we inevitably carry with us ontological presumptions that condition our implicit answers to them. An ontology determines what behaviour is seen as appropriate (and inappropriate), what a person is believed to be capable of doing (and incapable of doing), or how we should treat a person — with respect, dignity, and sincerity, or with irritation, derision, and neglect. These ontological presumptions often trace well-known forms of historic and ongoing marginalisation, exclusion, and abjection — a complex tracing, for they do not simply react to these violences but are complicit in their formation. We structure our teaching based on our ontological presumptions, both at a micro level in our classes, but also at a meso level in our institutions and a macro level as a sector and in response to government policy.

Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild are reacting to a particular ontology that has gone hand in hand with the UK's marketisation of higher education over the past fifteen years (Brooks et al., 2020). This ontology neither caused the marketisation of higher education nor was an effect of marketisation, but instead emerged in a complex interplay with the changing material conditions of this marketisation: primarily the transference of the source of higher education funding away from the state and towards the sum of privatised students. For Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild, the ontology that traces this shift positions students as consumers — as isolated individuals whose voice is only meaningful when it can be abstracted from its material conditions in, for example, the UK's National Student Survey. This is an ontology that assumes students are nothing more than 'speck[s] of capital' as the political theorist Wendy Brown has phrased it (2015, p.94), decrying the transplanting of corporate 'best practice' (2015, pp.135–142) into the academy. Instead, Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild insist that students and teachers can only be understood in their environments, as embodied beings, imbricated in complex relationships with both human and non-human forms of life that can both be caring and wounding. This insistence on relationality then makes the question of care essential.

fundamentally, whether a particular form of dehumanisation is the necessary condition for any emancipatory pedagogy, given the Human's function as a racialised regulative norm.

Gravett goes into more detail in her monograph *Relational pedagogies: connections and mattering in higher education*. She argues that:

The relational encompasses humans, materialities, systems, and spaces within an entangled web of relations. Ultimately, I argue for the need to understand the situated, contextual, and messy nature of learning and teaching — that cannot be reduced to simplistic performance metrics (2023, pp.18–19).

For Gravett, understanding students and teachers in this manner pushes back at the fetishisation of student experience as the key metric to determine the effectiveness of our teaching:

This homogenized and reified student experience is problematic. Purportedly representative, but essentially meaningless, ultimately the limiting conception of a single student experience demands the exclusion and silencing of alternative accounts of higher education within one overarching ‘voice’: a voice from above, a voice from nowhere. Rather, students, like all people, have multiple, contradictory, shifting, and evolving voices and experiences that can be understood and interpreted in multiple ways (2023, p.26).

Gravett therefore links 1) the reduction and abstraction of ‘the situated, contextual, and messy nature of learning and teaching’, 2) the individuation of student experience, and 3) the marketisation of higher education, making clear that the latter requires abstraction and individuation. As I will go on to argue, this has important implications for the use to which emancipatory educational practices can be put.

For Gravett, relational pedagogies that prioritise care are the antidote to this abstraction and individuation of the student experience. However, Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild are clear that care cannot be understood as a simple good, but is instead ‘a complex, potentially problematic and ambivalent notion’ (2021, p.392). The one caring is often exposed to wounding — particularly for women, those racialised as non-white, those who are precarious, and those who emerge at the intersection of these positionalities. Care, understood in this way, is not a simple normative framework for determining good conduct, but is a more fundamental, philosophical reimagining of how we exist: in philosophical parlance it is onto-epistemological, and at the same time implicating the ethical and the political.

Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild are modest in their proposals, arguing that their work suggests a greater emphasis on student co-creation, a mindfulness of the spatial arrangement of our classes, and the encouragement of authentic assessments that

develop over a module, utilising techniques such as self-assessment to shift the power dynamic of student and teacher (2021, pp.393–400). I do not mean to downplay these ideas — none of them are new, but few of them are meaningfully implemented in our teaching beyond some occasional experiments, and I would be delighted if they became normal techniques within a more dignified educational experience. However, Gravett's point is less about the techniques that might inculcate a certain type of classroom experience, and more about the generation of a primary sense of trust, one that is centred on the situated knowledge of a particular student and, taking a step back, the situated knowledge of the small community that makes up the class — including both students and teacher. A fundamental premise of this sense of trust, I argue, is a radical principle of intellectual equality: an equal and assumed capacity for thinking and speaking, and then translating the thought and speech of others, as the philosopher and pedagogic thinker Jacques Rancière might say (2011, pp.10–11). As I will go on to argue, this localised trust and the assumption of intellectual equality that underpins it have stark implications for the limits of what we can do with these practices: not only of the extent to which particular techniques can and should 'improve' the students we work with, but also of the scalability and generalisability of emancipatory teaching and learning — particularly the practising of vulnerability.²

Situated vulnerability

Vulnerability should be a keyword in discussions of pedagogies of care because, as the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero has argued, care and wounding are the two sides of vulnerability (2011, p.30). If I am vulnerable, I am exposed, 'capable of being wounded' as the Latin etymology suggests. However, it is this exposure that creates the conditions for care, not just in response to wounding but as a common, everyday practice.

Vulnerability is, more properly, the *potential* for care or wound that follows from our primary exposure. I may carry the hope that this exposure will enable a more meaningful and profound connection with another person — that it will allow me to attend to *who* they are, rather than *what* they are, as Hannah Arendt would say (1998, p.179). Nonetheless, there is no guarantee that my vulnerability will be responded to with care — no guarantee that another will 'apprehend' (Huzar, 2021) who I am, rather than simply recognising or

² For a critique of the rationale behind the 'improvement' of students, see Harney and Moten (2021).

representing what I am. Vulnerability can be exploited, as is well known. To practise vulnerability, then, is to practise trust. What does this mean for students and teachers?

For Gravett, vulnerability is an important component of her account of relational pedagogy (2023, pp.37–50). She notes that teaching demands a certain vulnerability, an investment in ideas and concepts, a testing out of experimental ways of thinking, a questioning, and an uncertainty. However, vulnerability is uncomfortable, so there can be a tendency to close oneself off from one's students in the performance of the role of 'teacher'. Gravett quotes Parker Palmer, who says 'we build a wall between inner truth and outer performance, and we play-act the teacher's part' (cited Gravett, 2023, p.37). Instead, for Gravett, 'by sharing our own vulnerabilities, challenges, and identities, we present ourselves as fallible and as ongoing learners, alongside our students... and create openings to potentially disrupt traditional student–teacher binaries and power hierarchies' (2023, p.38). As a consequence, a focus on care, relationality, and vulnerability can run counter to the marketisation of higher education, particularly when we do not think of care naively but recognise its sometimes-intimate relationship with wounding. However, practising vulnerability can also be an affirmation of the simple joy of learning that is proper to all people of any age. It is not simply reactionary but is better thought as primary — a way of being that marketisation extracts and abstracts, rendering students and staff stultified (Rancière, 1991, p.7).

In my work as an educator, practising vulnerability has not involved any grand gestures or searing soul-exposure. I do not think it needs these to still be powerful and effective and indeed, I think a more profound exposure would come up against significant ethical issues. I do not want to fall apart in front of my students, in part because the duty of care I have to them is different to the duty of care we more generally share as people existing together in the classroom, and certainly different to the duty of care my students have to each other and to themselves. Instead, for me, practising vulnerability has typically meant not shying away from speaking from my standpoint, from aversive experiences in particular, and, critically, from my own intellectual limits in the face of the material that we are studying. The need for the teacher to perform as omnipotent is a pernicious normative ideal reinforced by the quantification of individuated, abstracted student satisfaction. It is not only insincere — none of us are masters — but also inhibits the sense of unbridled exploration that is at the heart of emancipatory educational experiences.

It is one thing for me to modestly practise vulnerability, and another thing to ask my students to do this. This involves care: the meta-learning of taking care of oneself and those around you, attending both to our limits — a practice of humility — and to our situatedness. There is no textbook here, but in my teaching I stress to students that practising vulnerability is about learning when it is appropriate to do this, not just for others but also for ourselves. Practising vulnerability is about treading carefully in the absence of an abstract set of principles which would afford us surety, being mindful that what is said cannot be unsaid, and knowing that the refusal to centre some degree of vulnerability in the classroom is an unquestioned right. Nonetheless, in the classes where my students and I have managed to practise vulnerability — modestly, carefully — these experiences have revealed the primary pleasure in being a dependent creature with the capacity to learn: always in relation, enjoying a mundane happiness in our shared acts of translation and counter-translation, trial and error, and experimentation and improvisation. As Cavarero notes, ‘there is happiness in experiencing and sharing the public exhibition of our incarnate plurality. There is joy in physically engendering freedom’ (2021, p.xi).

This primary pleasure is integral to the assumption of intellectual equality that is presumed when one practises vulnerability. ‘Intellectual equality’ does not mean ‘having the same knowledge’. To insist on that would be a stretch — typically, although not always, I have read more books on a topic than my students have. Instead, in Rancière’s words, ‘the verification of the equality of intelligence... does not signify the equal value of all manifestations of intelligence, but the self-equality of intelligence in all its manifestations’ (2011, p.10). Intellectual equality means we assume that we all have the same *capacity* to make sense of the world — to go on intellectual adventures (Rancière, 2011, p.17). This is a capacity that can only ever be assumed, never proven. It is not something students can demonstrate, nor something teachers can assess.

In this light, the practising of vulnerability should not be understood as another technique in developing effective learners. As Gert Biesta (2009, p.36) insists, this begs the questions of effective for what and for whom. Instead, there should be a shift in emphasis: not, ‘how can I as an educator practise vulnerability to achieve a desired response from my students?’, but rather, ‘how can we as a community studying together practise vulnerability, without losing sight of our difference and the particular roles we each occupy in the classroom, not least the fundamental binary of student and teacher?’. Practising vulnerability resists this technical abstraction because vulnerability always refers to

another person in their situatedness — to what Biesta, following Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas, describes as ‘*uniqueness-as-irreplaceability*’ (2016, p.21, emphasis original). To instrumentalise vulnerability as a technique for coaxing a desired response from our students is not to attend to our students in their specificity. In saying this I do not want to avoid the question of how I as an educator practise vulnerability, but I want it to be a necessary yet secondary question to the primary one of how an educational community practises vulnerability, in our situatedness, which is both our individual situatedness and the collective situatedness we manifest as we study together.

If, as Ercikan and Roth note, ‘the power of research derives from the fact that it produces knowledge that can be used in multiple settings’ (2014, p.20), then vulnerability’s non-instrumental nature — or more specifically, its idiosyncrasy: only being meaningful in particular instantiations — would appear to place limits on its generalisability and scalability for broader higher education policy, therefore calling its value into question. However, for Ercikan and Roth, the determination of the success of generalisability must be related to the use to which the findings are put (2014, pp.18–19). What counts as valuable information — or, indeed, what counts as information per se as opposed to mere noise — depends upon how that information will end up being used. If the use is the development of abstracted techniques that can be distributed across departments, faculties, and institutions, then necessarily local, attentive practices will either not be useful, or could only be made useful by ridding them of their ‘situated, contextual, and messy nature’ (2023, p.18), to again quote Gravett — that is, to rid them of that which is essential to them.

This means that the use to which these practices can be put will itself be determined by the form of the practices that are being analysed. In the case of practising vulnerability, its situatedness places limits on its coherent use as a generalisable technique that can be taught to teachers, but not necessarily as a practice of any particular educator and their students. Practising vulnerability ceases to carry meaning when analysed in the abstract, detached from ‘whatever being’ (Agamben, 1993, p.1) or community of learners — what Donna Haraway famously referred to as a ‘god trick’ of infinite vision (1988, p.582).³ If practising vulnerability is taught at a general level, then what ends up being taught is not

³ There is a subtle difference here: Haraway’s point was that all knowledge is situated, whereas I am drawing attention to the way this situatedness is a necessary part of practising vulnerability, without calling into account Haraway’s broader claim.

the practising of vulnerability but its abstraction, apart from the local community that gave the practice its meaning. The extraction of value from the practice of vulnerability returns us to what Gravett identified: the marketised higher education landscape that requires the abstraction of student experience and pedagogic practice to ensure the smooth transactional flow of teaching and learning. Practising vulnerability, then, is cognate with Elizabeth Ellsworth's insistence that:

A recognition, contrary to all Western ways of knowing and speaking, that all knowings are partial, that there are fundamental things each of us cannot know — a situation alleviated only in part by the pooling of partial, socially constructed knowledges in classrooms — demands a fundamental retheorizing of 'education' and 'pedagogy' (1989, p.310).

As a consequence, knowledges in a classroom 'cannot be made to "make sense" — they cannot be known in terms of the single master discourse of an educational project's curriculum or theoretical framework, even that of critical pedagogy' (Ellsworth, 1989, p.321). As 'a practice grounded in the unknowable', emancipatory education 'is profoundly contextual (historical) and interdependent (social)' (Ellsworth, 1989, p.323). The form it takes is contingent, refusing the irrelation of one who would know it without being a part of it. It is not only the case, as Biesta correctly notes, that there has been a 'rise of a culture of performativity in education... in which means become ends in themselves so that targets and indicators of quality become mistaken for quality itself', which means that 'we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure' (2009, p.35). More fundamentally, educational emancipation is not an end but *a means without end* (Agamben, 2000). It is this that means it can neither be taught nor measured.

Risks and limits

Practising vulnerability is, of course, not without its risks. This is not only because the trust implicit in practising vulnerability requires risk for its self-definition as trust — if there were no risk there would be no need to trust another — but more generally because of systemic and structural forms of injustice, and the material conditions of teaching in higher education.

First, practising vulnerability is less risky for some, more risky for others. In a patriarchal, antiblack world that already tends to safeguard the vulnerability of white people, men, and

neurotypical people at the expense of people marginalised due to their racialisation, gendering, or neurodivergence, practising vulnerability may be a big ask. As Gravett notes:

Newer teachers, teachers on precarious contracts, female teachers, teachers feeling estranged within predominantly white spaces or teachers who are constrained by the forces of metricization and measurement for whatever reason, may not be able to take the risks that I and other colleagues have discussed here (2023, p.50).

Many of these factors would also increase the risk for students too. These issues become particularly stark in the context of much pedagogic and broader social science research that positions vulnerability as a wholly negative or, at best, neutral phenomenon, describing the ways particular people are differentially at risk of wounding as a consequence of systemic identitarian marginalisation, and, secondarily, as an existential phenomenon proper to being human (Prinsloo and Slade, 2016; Oleksiyenko and Tierney, 2018). However, when vulnerability is, as I have argued following Cavarero, conceptualised as a complex binary of care and/or wound, then people's differential vulnerability necessitates a more attentive and careful practice, but may not require the wholesale rejection of practising vulnerability. Practising vulnerability begins precisely from the need to centre these differential forms of wounding without, nonetheless, allowing them to overdetermine a pedagogic encounter. As Prinsloo and Slade note (2016, p.166), this overdetermination can unwittingly become 'pathogenic' despite the good intentions of centring differential vulnerabilities in our analysis and practice. Critically, however, in the light of the non-scalable and non-generalisable nature of practising vulnerability, the decision of whether to enact this practice or not can only ever be made by those in relation to one another in a specific pedagogic encounter. Advice from a third party who is abstracted from the relation that those studying together find themselves in will only be of limited use.

Second, if practising vulnerability, to be done ethically, requires a serious, prolonged, and engaged meta-learning process — particularly in the wake of people's previously noted differential vulnerability — then the time-pressures of teaching in higher education tend to place limits on the extent of this intellectual scaffolding and the care that it enables.

Responding to this requires a transformation of the funding and management of universities: refusing to treat education as a transaction, treating it instead as the innate good that it is, and rejecting the ideologically induced myopia that leads to the destruction

of disciplines and subjects not seen as profitable.⁴ However, perhaps what is also needed is an interrogation of the distinction between meta-learning and the formal content of our modules. What is lost when content is privileged over the creation of the conditions necessary to meaningfully engage with this content (Peterson et al., 2020)? When might the teaching of meta-learning be at the same time a teaching of content? However, these reflections are beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

Despite these challenges, I nonetheless want to insist that some degree of practising vulnerability should be central to our caring and compassionate pedagogies. What practicing vulnerability means will only ever be particular to its localised instantiation, resisting its articulation as an abstract set of best practices. While practising vulnerability may be a privilege, it is also notable that some forceful and coherent arguments in its favour — or in favour of other cognate pedagogic practices — have emerged from traditions of thought that are marginalised, be they feminist traditions, Black radical traditions, or indigenous traditions (Motta and Bennett, 2018, p.636). While the material conditions of teaching in higher education make fostering trusting educational communities challenging, nonetheless I suggest the principle of practising vulnerability is sound and may enable us to thread joyful study within stultifying extant conditions, despite these material pressures. If these pressures have precipitated a breakdown of trust between students and teachers — have they done the reading? Is this their work or the work of a generative artificial intelligence? — then practising vulnerability may be one way of rebuilding trust, even if this is only at the local level.

Practising vulnerability, then, will often be a modest gesture, but it is no less powerful because of this. It is not an instrumental technique, but a situated practice that places limits on the extent to which it can be abstracted and still be meaningful. Practising vulnerability demands trust and presumes an intellectual equality that is the source of emancipatory experiences of learning. It begins with the specificity of a student and of the class that we are a part of. It is a practice of care that is not ignorant of people's differential

⁴ This is exemplified by the vandalism done to my intellectual home, the Humanities degree programme at the University of Brighton, by the university's senior managers. For more information, see <https://sites.google.com/view/humanities-under-threat-at-uob/home>.

risks of wounding, while at the same time cautioning against overdetermining the way we relate to one another. And, despite the all-too-real antisocial pressures that both students and teachers are affected by, it can maintain emancipatory study in our universities that consequently keeps alive ways of imagining education as a celebration of our situated, everyday practices of care.

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