
Teaching the Whole Person through a Pedagogy of Compassion

OCTOBER 2019

Reinhardt University
Center for Innovative Teaching and Engaged Learning
Authored by Lydia Ellen Laucella

Introduction

Compassion is the cornerstone of Reinhardt University’s (RU) mission, which is to “educate the whole person by developing the intellectual, social, personal, vocational, spiritual and physical dimensions of its students” (About Reinhardt, 2019). RU’S Center of Innovative Teaching and Engaged Learning (CITEL) mission aligns with RU’s mission to foster a campus culture that values collaboration and interaction among teachers and students in order to:

- Nurture innovation in the practice of teaching and
- To emphasize the role of engagement in learning, at Reinhardt University and in its surrounding communities.

The purpose of this inaugural edition of RU CITEL’s white paper is to explore what is at the heart of innovative teaching and engaged learning- *compassion*. In this paper, we explore the foundations of compassion pedagogy and how it relates to RU’s mission. It will also provide recommendations for instructors to incorporate a pedagogy of compassion in their classrooms and will provide other considerations in relation to compassion at RU.

“The deepest classroom learning takes place when we recognize that teachers and students come to class as whole persons...with a loving soul and soulful spirit” (Schoem, 2017, p. 79).

Working Toward A Pedagogy of Compassion to Teach the Whole Person

Friere's (1970) work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is one of the foundational texts of critical pedagogy- this pedagogical stance encourages critical consciousness. Critical consciousness requires developing an in-depth understanding of the world *and* its contradictions. Thereby, exploring oppression in one's own life develops a critical consciousness of the human experience. In other words, as exploration of the human experience is the keystone to a liberal arts education, and the human experience involves suffering, then teaching is an act of compassion in that compassion is the act of suffering together and is necessary to the human experience (Vandeyar & Swart, 2013).

Teaching to the whole person involves tapping into students' cognitive, affective, physical and spiritual development (Jacobs and Alcock, 2019). In fact, "even in a time of increased emphasis on the pragmatics of education for employment, we see that students still wish to explore the values, meaning, and purpose of their lives while in college...[so] if we are to educate the whole human being, then these dimensions of their nature cannot be forgotten" (Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010, p.117). Focusing on educating the whole person requires understanding individuals and their relationships to others and to their community (Jacobs and Alcock, 2019).

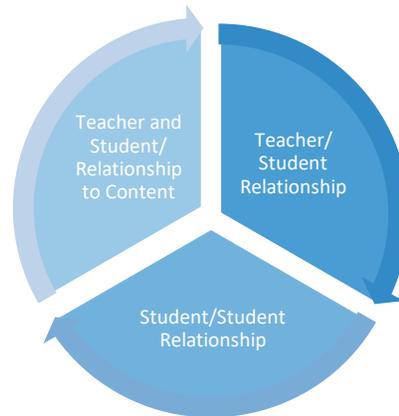
A compassionate teacher supports the intricate relationality of teaching. In a compassionate classroom, teaching is reciprocal and participatory- teachers and students collaboratively create deep knowledge of content that is used and developed in authentic contexts (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). In a compassionate classroom, students develop a trusting relationship with the instructor, with other students, and with the content. A pedagogy of compassion allows us to put the heart of education back into our teaching. Compassion pedagogy is the foundation of good teaching- "a great teacher with a strong connection to a student makes all the difference" (Lipka, 2019, p.12). When we put our heart into teaching, we can teach to the whole person.

Properly fostering these relationships allows students to produce meaningful learning experiences. In addition, a compassionate teacher recognizes individual student abilities, differences, and prior knowledge, which all contribute to the development of engaged pedagogical practices (Reiner & Willingham, 2010). There is a triad of relationships that exists in our classrooms that we should consider (Schoem, 2017):

- The teacher-to-student relationship.
- The student-to-student relationship.
- The teacher and student relationship- to- content.

By innovating this triad of relationships, we can provide support for students on their varied learning paths *and* journeys through life while creating a sense of institutional belonging.

Figure 1. Relational Teaching. This figure depicts relational teaching as described by Schoem (2017).



However, there are factors that can disrupt our ability to foster these relationships- "the life experiences these students have outside of school and the problems they face daily; which we often disregard as irrelevant to the classroom, permeate their success in the classroom" (Hernandez, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, it is imperative to provide safe, compassionate spaces for our students to explore the human experience.

Model compassion

What can you do to demonstrate compassion? Don't assume that students know that you care. Students come to our classes with varied educational and life experiences with compassion. Consider the following in your courses:

- State that you care and state it often.
- Show concern by reaching out to students who don't show up to face-to-face and/or online courses.
- Provide focused and positive feedback when appropriate.
- Provide small, frequent encouraging moments. When students show growth, praise them for it. When students need a little extra push, willfully give it to them.
- Demonstrate that you are truly invested in their learning- come to class prepared, show patience, make yourself available to your students.
- Provide learning experiences that require students to apply compassion- consider incorporating service learning or similar opportunities that require students to participate in compassionate practices.

Always assess disengaged behaviors.

Students tend to disengage by manifesting what could be considered disrespectful or disruptive classroom behaviors. For example, students might fall asleep in class, talk out of turn, engage in attention-seeking behaviors, check their phone often, come to class late, miss class, miss assignments, sit in the back of the class, or seem disinterested in the subject. These instances of student disengagement should always be assessed.

An instructor should be slow to assume that students are disengaged because they don't like the professor or the material. Some students might be having difficulty acclimating to college or to a classroom environment where the instructor is invested in them. Others might be struggling with serious personal and/or family situations. Among the common issues that affect young adult college students that we often fail to consider are: homelessness, poverty, family conflict, long-term family or personal illness, mental illness, family obligations, fatigue from athletics or from working multiple jobs, and being a working parent.

What can you do to assess disengagement?

- **Ask questions!** - Ask students if they are okay and what they need help with. Sometimes this simple action is enough to show compassion and can resolve the issue. Sometimes you will find that students will reveal the reason behind their disengagement. If this is a more serious issue and students need to talk in private, offer an ear (if you are comfortable with this) or point them toward the appropriate campus support systems.
- **Report student behavior-** if you are concerned about your student's behavior or personal situation, you should reach out the student and let them know that you would like to find extra resources to help them. Reach out to campus officials who can help.

Considerations

RU and CITEL's mission to develop and foster relationships between the teacher/student and the larger community by educating the whole person can be accomplished by incorporating a pedagogy of compassion. A pedagogy of compassion not only has implications on the success of the institution to achieve its mission, it also has enormous implications on the success of a student and his/her ability to create meaningful, learning experiences. For instance, "students learn more when they are motivated to do so by the inspiration and enthusiasm of their instructors" (Nilson, 2016, p.26). Compassion pedagogy *is* an engaged teaching practice.

But we must also support each other in the compassionate act of teaching. "The development of the whole student requires the development of the whole faculty member or staff member. Faculty need to be better recognized, evaluated and nurtured for their contributions in meeting the holistic needs of today's college students" (Palmer, Zajonc, Scribner, 2010, p. 171). We should suffer our failures and celebrate our successes together. After all, we are all engaged in the human experience.

References

- About Reinhardt. (2019). Reinhardt University. Retrieved from <https://www.reinhardt.edu/about/>
- Friere, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Hernandez, P. (2016). *The pedagogy of real talk: Engaging, teaching, and connecting with students at risk*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jacobs, H.H., & Alcock, M. H. (2019). *Bold Moves for Schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/115013/chapters/Refreshed-Pedagogy-for-the-Contemporary-Learner.aspx>
- Lipka, S. (2019). The truth about student success: Myths, realities and 30 practices that are working. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Washington, D.C.
- Nilson, L. (2016). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors*. New York: Wiley & Sons.
- Palmer, P. J., Zajonc, A., Scribner, M. (2010). *The heart of higher education: A call to renewal. Transforming the academy through collegial conversations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rashedi, R., Plante, T.G., Callister, E.S. (2015). Compassion development in higher education. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 25(2), 131-139.
- Reiner, C. & Willingham, D. (2010). The myth of learning styles. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00091383.2010.503139>
- Schoem, D. (2017). Relational teaching and learning: The classroom as community and the community as classroom. In D. Schoem, C. Modey, E. P. St. John (Eds.), *Teaching the whole student* (79-99). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, in association with AAC&U.
- Vandeyar, S., & Swart, R. (2016). Educational change: A case for a 'pedagogy of compassion'. *UNISA: Education as Change*, 20(30), 141-159.
- Wilson, S. & Peterson, P. (2006). Theories of learning and teaching. What do they mean for

educators? NEA.