

Essay 09

Creating More Caring University Classrooms

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It's been 25 years since educational scholar and philosopher Nel Noddings authored "The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education," championing caring relations as fundamental to teaching and learning.

She argued that rather than focusing narrowly and obsessively on curriculum, a crucial goal for every school should be preparing young people to care—about knowledge, about the planet, and about each other.

Today, ongoing debates around assessment notwithstanding, educators largely agree that the best educational environments are caring spaces.¹ Yet, most of the work around caring classrooms is focused at the primary and secondary levels.

Consider that in Canada, 66 percent of university students said they felt "very lonely" in the last year. In the United States, the most recent National College Health Assessment found that 19 percent of students had felt "things were hopeless" within the past two weeks, 50.8 percent had felt overwhelmed, and 25.5 percent had felt very lonely. And in the course of just one year, from 2014-2015, 80 percent of universities in the U.K. reported an increase in student mental health issues. As such, I believe we must weave caring, connectedness, and compassion into post-secondary education as well—for the sake of students, professors, and society as a whole.

Noddings powerfully challenged the notion of "caring" as something that involved the teacher only. It is not enough for teachers to throw themselves into their work; students have to feel "cared-for." In Noddings' view, the affirmative response of the cared-for is as vital as the attention of the one-caring; it is in that engagement and mutual exchange that the most significant advances can occur. Moreover, the reciprocal nature of the relationship benefits both sides: Building trust that makes students more



open to the material teachers are teaching; surfacing information about students' individual strengths and interests that help teachers better tailor their lessons; and inspiring teachers toward continual self-improvement in an effort to better serve their students' needs.²

Last fall, I had the opportunity to put those principles into practice in the university environment. I taught an interdisciplinary seminar for fourth-year students at McGill University titled "Lessons of Community and Compassion: Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social Connectedness Through Policy and Program Development." This was the first course of its kind, exploring the concepts of isolation and connectedness as they relate to marginalized communities around the world. The 35 students who enrolled came from a range of backgrounds, and most had never met each other before.

I wanted to design for them the kind of course that I never experienced as a student myself. My goal was to foster a sense of community within the classroom that ultimately would transcend it, where every student would feel secure, and no one would feel alone. Put another way, I wanted our time together in the classroom to be a microcosm of the socially connected world we talked about each week: A place where there was no "other"; there was only all of us.

To me, a caring university classroom rests on a new kind of "Three R's": Respect, Recognition, and Reciprocity.

Respect means that students know that their voices and experiences are valued and heard. Recognition means that everyone is seen and accepted for who they are, as a whole person—not just a number or a grade, but an individual whose unique differences are welcomed. Reciprocity means that everyone has something to give, and something to gain. No one is above anyone else. We learn, and teach, together.³

Even small gestures can go a long way toward cultivating inclusiveness and support. By making a point to quickly learn my students' names, and consistently encouraging new voices to participate in class discussions, I signaled to my students that their presence was welcomed and their ideas mattered—not just to me, but also to the rest of the class. As the semester progressed, I was heartened to see them eagerly reciprocate. They collaborated with one another both inside and outside the classroom. They took the initiative to create a Facebook page to post and comment on material inspired by what we were learning in class. And when

the proverbial bell would end class conversations before we reached a satisfactory conclusion, they came to office hours to pick up where we left off.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that caring university classrooms can be a matter of life and death for young people navigating a critical and often stressful path to early adulthood.

Trends like these suggest that university life needs an infusion of caring and community. Such an infusion would fortify students—and nourish faculty, too. In the United States, for example, the most recent National Survey of Student Engagement found that 34 percent of first-year students say they *never* discussed course topics or ideas with a faculty member outside of class. Fifty percent say they *never* worked with a faculty member on anything other than coursework. This lack of personal connection and interaction is a terrible loss for both sides.

After all, many professors are drawn to academia by a desire to teach: To share their passion for a particular subject and to engage their students on a deeper level. Yet, the institutional demands of academia—administrative work, fundraising for scholarship and research, and, for newer professors still on the tenure track, the pressure to “publish or perish”—can overwhelm the time and incentive to focus on the art of teaching, much less to focus on building relationships and community with and for students.

We must make it easier for university professors to impart their gifts as teachers and as carers: To enable them to build real relationships with students beyond simply lecturing and grading, so that everyone works toward a common goal of learning and discovery.

The bonds students develop with professors and peers have a significant impact on their happiness. Feeling connected makes a difference in their academic achievement, too. As Daniel Chambliss—a sociology professor at Hamilton College and the author of *How College Works*, a book examining the importance of relationships in undergraduate careers—put it, “the key to motivation is face-to-face contact with another human being... It's all about people, not programs.”⁴ Having access to professors provides direct motivation and critical encouragement for students to excel in their learning.

Others have echoed Chambliss's findings. In a study on the connection



between faculty practices and student engagement, researchers from the University of Iowa and Michigan State University concluded, “The educational context created by faculty behaviors and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement. Institutions where faculty engage students in and out of the classroom and place a high priority on enriching educational experiences had students who felt supported and were active participants in their learning.”⁵

When people feel secure, when they feel accepted, an environment is established in which the best learning can flourish.

Plus, there is another important benefit that flows from a caring classroom. Belonging can inspire students to heal the world they are inheriting. Through receiving caring and being part of a caring environment, students become connected to their teachers, their peers, and their learning in a reciprocal and empowering relationship.

This rising generation is already eager to contribute to the betterment of society—and one in four young people say that “more knowledge about how to get involved would be most likely to help them” do so.⁶ They already believe in equal rights and equal treatment. They’re already open-minded and accepting.

The most important thing we need is to get young people to believe in *themselves*.

If young people can see that they have the power to make a difference, they’ll do the rest on their own. We must show them how engaged citizens can advocate for strong, healthy, connected communities. We must teach them to channel their own voices to drive change. We must equip them with *agency*—not just to be in the world, but also to lead it.

Belonging helps foster this agency for positive change, which as in Amartya Sen’s conceptualization relates not to power over others but rather, empowering and enabling others. Indeed, agency is the person’s ability to act on what they value and have reason to value which serves to strengthen our collective interest in ensuring young people have access to and begin to see caring as a core value.

One of the things I did in my class was to introduce guest speakers. I was fortunate to be able to recruit distinguished men and women—journalists from *The Washington Post*, researchers from Human Rights

Watch, non-profit leaders, activists, and more—each combating isolation in their own way. My students said it was hugely inspiring to hear these individuals' stories, and to see that there were so many ways to make their mark on the world.

There are many other ways to help young people find their own pathway forward. Inspired by our experience as a class, my students organized a discussion on campus called *Teaching with Compassion: Holistic Approaches to Building Community in the University Classroom*. The students polled their fellow students and subsequently invited a panel of McGill professors to share their own experiences and perspectives. Each of the speakers had been nominated by students because of their dedication and effective approaches to teaching. As the co-organizers explained in their welcoming remarks, the faculty members on the panel were fostering belonging in the classroom, whether they know it or not; and each of them makes their students feel like “more than just a number.”

The event was an opportunity to share and mutually support efforts that foster belonging and care in the classroom from diverse disciplines. Professor Lisa Trimble, from the department of integrated studies in education, spoke of the importance of knowing her students' names and stories, and of being meaningful and authentic in interactions. She said that students need to be given “low-stake opportunities” to try out ideas. Physics professor Ken Ragan described how he strives to make his students feel like scientists. Tina Piper, who teaches in the faculty of law, said she encourages students to connect their own experiences to what they're learning.

Current institutional structures and even the labeling and design of spaces especially within the post-secondary environment can lead to an uncaring environment. When classrooms become formal lecture halls with professors situated at lecterns presiding over students, we create distance as opposed to connection. Professor Trimble also noted that institutional policies, such as how and when students must submit assignments can run counter to supporting students. “When we only define student success by grades,” she said, “we lose the human experience.”

I couldn't agree more. It hearkens back to Nel Noddings' observation that “What we learn in the daily reciprocity of caring goes far deeper than test results.”⁷



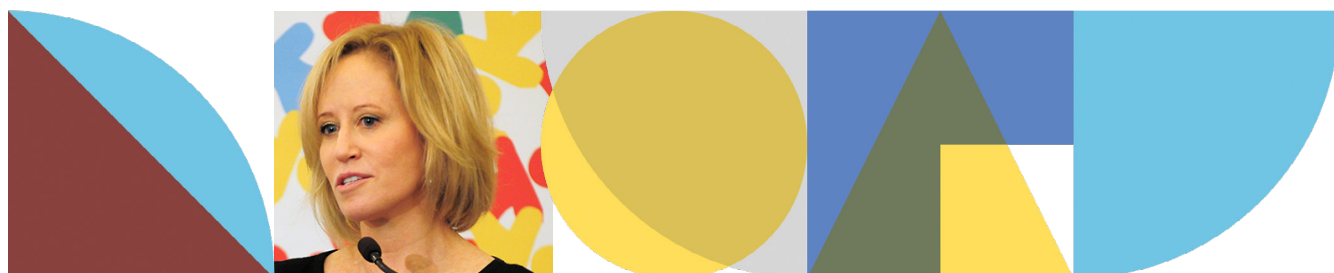
At the end of the semester, I told my class how proud I was of them. I said I believed in them. Every single one. I meant it from the bottom of my heart. Afterward, one of my quieter students approached me, and said, “Nobody has ever said, ‘I believe in you,’ in my whole life.” My last words to her, and her last words to me, were transformative for us both. As a professor, I’d helped her see her own potential—and, as a student, she had helped me see mine. Respect, recognition, and reciprocity had uplifted us both.

I’m still in touch with the majority of my students. I can see them putting knowledge into practice. Some of them now volunteer together in Montreal. Some have plans to start social enterprises to build more connected communities. Others want to create a kind of support network when they graduate, so future McGill students can benefit from their experience and advice. All of them say the relationships they forged were what made the class so special.

To me, it’s the blossoming of tomorrow’s global citizens, who will put connectedness first; who welcome difference, embrace diversity, and will resist the calls for walls. If we want the world to start building more bridges, let’s create more caring university classrooms.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Evidence for this agreement emerges from the plethora of teaching resources focused on caring that emerged in this period especially geared to young children, these include: Charney, Ruth, *Teaching Children to Care: Classroom Management for Ethical and Academic Growth*, Turners Falls, MA, Center for Responsive Schools, 2002; Johnston, D. Kay, *Education for a caring society: classroom relationships and moral action*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2006.; Levine, David A., *Teaching empathy: a blueprint for caring, compassion, and community*, Bloomington, IN : Solution Tree, 2005; Tabata, Susanne, Chomsky, Noam, *Shaking the tree: social responsibility in education*, Vancouver, BC, Tabata Production Associates, 1995; and Taulbert, Clifton L., *Eight habits of the heart for educators: building strong school communities through timeless values*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006.
- 2 Noddings, Nel. "Caring in education." *Infed*. 2005. www.infed.org/biblio/noddings_caring_in_education.htm.
- 3 The new 3 R's I present here emerge from carefully listening and learning from Indigenous worldviews and philosophies. Among many sources, E. Richard Atleo, *Tsawalk: a Nuuchahnulth Worldview*, (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2004) is hugely informative.
- 4 Pandolfo, Nick. "Q&A with Dan Chambliss: A successful college education can come down to a single conversation." *The Hechinger Report*. May 17, 2012. <http://hechingerreport.org/qa-with-dan-chambliss-a-successful-college-education-can-come-down-to-a-single-conversation/>.
- 5 Umbach, Paul D. and Matthew R. Wawrzynski. "Faculty Do Matter: The Role of College Faculty in Student Learning and Engagement." *Research in Higher Education* Vol 46, Issue 2. March 2005. http://nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/research_papers/faculty_do_matter.pdf.
- 6 "What the World's Young People Think and Feel," *Generation Z Global Citizenship Survey*, Varkey Foundation 2017; p.19.
- 7 Noddings, Nel. "Caring in education." *Infed*. 2005. www.infed.org/biblio/noddings_caring_in_education.htm.



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