

Unveiling opportunities for hope

Is it too much to ask for a compassionate university?

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A few years ago, one of us responded, in this journal, to an article by Australian academic Eva Peterson, who had set out to celebrate the joy of an academic career (Boyd & Horstmanshof, 2013). Peterson explored the narratives of the aspirations of research academics as they moved forward in the academy, only to find a tale of woe (Peterson, 2011). There was, found Peterson, a malaise in the university. Early career scholars were making choices and expressing aspirations in an atmosphere of, as they understood and experienced it, overwork and undervalue. Instead of exciting career path strategies, Peterson encountered coping strategies and exit strategies. She concluded that policy makers and university managers would do well to listen to the stories of these academics, their narratives, instead of continuing, as she claimed, to dismiss and denigrate them. A grim picture indeed: one that, although the word was not used, lacked compassion.

We prefer, for the moment, not to revisit that tale of woe. We do note, nevertheless, that such a tale reflects a common situation in the academy. Many academics begin their career at university full of hope and ambition, to do, as Anne Pirrie (2018) calls it, 'good work well'. They arrive with plans to inspire their students, to instil a love of learning and of their chosen discipline, only to have the shine on their hope tarnished by the sheer grind of working in a higher education institution. There are many reasons for this – the increasing bureaucratisation of the university, shifting government and societal expectations, performance reporting processes, attitudes towards university education as job training, funding pressures, and

so on. As far back as 1992, the effects of such organisational sensibilities were recognised for the potentially destructive forces they appear to have become (Palmer, 1992). At that time, Palmer noted the importance of balance and symbiosis between, on the one hand, the conservative role of organisations and, on the other hand, the dynamic roles of social movements, in simultaneously maintaining status quo and driving change. This balance, Palmer reminded us, is essential to a healthy society. However, he then warned us (p. 10), 'when an organisation mentality is imposed on a problem that requires movement sensibilities, the result is often despair'. It appears we have progressed beyond this Palmerian moment.

This opinion piece is, for this moment, a response, a thinking experiment about how to make a shift against narratives that oppress, and how to respond positively to the 'compelling need for compassionate academic leadership in our universities' (Waddington, 2018, p.87). We unashamedly draw on writers from more demanding educational circumstances – from the socially charged environments of late twentieth century Brazil and the emergence of post-apartheid South Africa – to provide inspiration that demonstrates change is possible in the academy.

How do we know that we are beyond the Palmerian moment? The evidence is clear. It lies in the narratives that academics provide when asked about their daily experience of working in the university. We appear to be in a situation, rightly or wrongly, that fosters deficit narratives, narratives of coping, narratives of leaving, and narratives of despair. These are easy narratives to

perpetuate, founded on a strong sense of being uncared for, of being unappreciated, and of being put upon. Who reading this opinion piece has not experienced the narratives of woe from disgruntled colleagues? The war stories of excessive hours of marking? The inequities of rules that 'they', some faceless others, impose upon us? Others who get promoted but could not, it is asserted with righteous indignation, teach their way out of a brown paper bag? These are powerful narratives, which, importantly, largely serve to reinforce negative visions of working in the university – the 'paradigm of suffering' that Dickson & Summerville argue need to be replaced by the 'right to be well' (2018, p. 24). In short, these are narratives borne of, and potentially validating, a tangible sense of lack of compassion in the system. Perhaps we are being gentle in such an assessment; perhaps we should be more direct. Take, for example, Freire and Faundez's (1989, p. 42) assessment of the situation: 'Brutalising the work force by subjecting them to routine procedures is part of the nature of the capitalist mode of production. And what is taking place in the reproduction of knowledge in the schools is in large part a reproduction of that mechanism.'

Regardless of perspective, however, for those who value the institution of the university, these are worrisome narratives. Is it possible to counter them? Paulo Freire, despite the previous quote, offers a two-pronged statement of hope: an early declaration of intent – 'In order to achieve humanisation, which presupposes the elimination of dehumanising oppression, it is absolutely necessary to surmount the limit-situations in which men [and women] are reduced to things' (Freire, 1970, p. 93) – followed by a later statement of practice – 'This capacity to always begin anew, to make, to reconstruct, and to not spoil, to refuse to bureaucratise the mind, to understand and to live as a process – live to become – is something that always accompanied me throughout life' (Freire, 1993, p. 98). In short, yes, it is possible to counter these worrisome narratives.

It is now a matter of considering how we might replace such deficit narratives. As experienced academics, we know that it is not enough to simply say that things are not as bad as you think. The strength of the deficit narrative is palpable; it is, indeed, a self-reinforcing power. We suggest, however, that it is possible to co-opt or appropriate the narrative as a powerful and positive mode of expression in itself, to use it to counter negativity, and to instil some sense of hope and compassion into the system. We have, indeed, already done this, and it works (Boyd *et al.*, 2012, 2013). As a senior academic, one of us adopted the role as a mentor to early and mid-career academics – indeed

often second-career academics whose professional cultural upbringing was outside the university – whose daily reality appears to accord with the deficit narrative. Second career academics hold up a useful mirror against which to check the health of the university. Without a scholarly apprenticeship – the years of PhD training and post-doctoral uncertainty – they are less immune to the curiosities of academic culture. In short, they often simply don't get it. Helping them transition into academe – refocusing their narratives – is important work; no one, generally, helped them when they were first employed. It is an opportunity to instil some good will and optimism – a vote of confidence, if you like – into their working day.

An academic's good will and optimism – should it not be subsumed by the daily grind – is reflected in all aspects of working life. It is especially important in building and maintaining compassionate collegial and student interactions. This emotional component of work echoes throughout the institution and throughout the student experience. Students – our greatest teachers, according to Freire – continually remind us of this point. They can enlighten us, if we are listening and paying attention. Students, for example, are clear about the role of empathy: empathy in workplace culture can have a huge influence in how they feel; role modelling of empathy is crucial; and, regardless of the positive benefits of an empathetic approach to one's work, maintaining empathy in the contemporary workplace can be challenging (Hughes *et al.*, 2018).

It is important to counter the deficit narrative with acknowledgement of reality. Such a declarative stance may require dogged optimism. One way to support that optimism is to look to the educational greats, the distinguished voices who affirm the vitally important role and transformative responsibilities that are embedded with, and in, teaching practice. One of the greatest optimists is the aforementioned Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire. We are, perhaps obviously, inspired by him, his words, his passion, his thoughts. We are inspired, in particular, when he talks about the task of the teacher and mentor as being to '*unveil opportunities for hope*, no matter what the obstacles may be' (Freire, 1992, p. 133; emphasis added).

Academics such as Vandeyar and Swart (2016), in their work on South African teaching practice, echo such opportunity of hope as they seek to rebuild post-apartheid compassion in education. We have much to learn from such charged conditions. Vandeyar and Swart write about the need for a pedagogy of compassion in the creation of a socially just and aware society. This is especially important if we accept the transformative purpose of teaching, and, therefore, acknowledge the responsibilities

that come with a transformative role. A teacher who embodies compassion in their teaching practice models to students a way of thinking and operating in the world has long term social impact.

Teachers not only need to be able to raise the critical consciousness of learners but they need to adopt an 'epistemology of compassion' in order to enable learners to become active critical citizens, imbued with a sense of common humanity and compassion. ... becoming an agent of transformative change may challenge the very premise of teachers' identities and practices, but by empowering the learner to exert influence on her world, the teacher is in turn also changed and empowered (Vandeyar & Swart, 2016, p. 141).

When academics are bound in a deficit narrative, however, their commitment to, and capacity for, a pedagogy of compassion may be much diminished. And so we come to the next question: How do we empower academics to set aside deficit narratives and take up compassion? We note that narratives play a critical role in both threatening and enabling compassion in the university system. 'Our only truth is narrative truth, the stories we tell each other and ourselves – the stories we continually recategorise and refine,' another Bill Boyd, not the same Bill Boyd co-authoring this opinion piece, informs us (Boyd, 2018), 'Such subjectivity is built into the very nature of memory and follows from its basis and mechanisms in the brains we have. The wonder is that aberrations of a gross sort are relatively rare and that for the most part our memories are so solid and reliable.' In other words, narrative is fundamental to our survival in the world. 'The only truth,' Boyd continues, 'is the narrative truth. Now that is something to contemplate.'

OK, narratives are essential to survival. How, then, might we, in the ethos of the ancient martial arts, use the strength of narrative against itself? Boyd draws our attention to some most important truths: of the fundamental nature of the narratives we build and tell and remember; of the continuity of our recategorisation and refinement of narratives; of the essential truthfulness of narratives. It is these qualities that may perpetuate a deficit narrative or may reinvigorate a compassionate narrative. It is these qualities that allow a university academic to cease being the reactive agent that the deficit narrative demands of him or her. It is these qualities that also allow the same academic to become an active agent in a compassionate education. To allow the teaching academic to no longer be, in more words from Freire, 'merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is him/herself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach' (Anon, 2018a). Importantly, Freire's observation is followed by an

important comment about the teacher and the student: they become '*jointly responsible* for a process in which all grow' (we have added the emphasis). In acknowledging the etymological roots of the word university – Latin, 'the whole, aggregate' and, notably, Late Latin, 'a number of persons associated into one body, a society, company, community, guild, corporation ...' – the notion of joint responsibility becomes a potent signifier of a compassionate relationship in the university; compassion ceases to be just as a 'private interpersonal value, but [becomes] a broader institutional and global value' (Magineess & MacKenzie, 2018, p. 42). Again, perhaps we are being too gentle in proposing such a suggestion. Anne Pirrie, in her 2018 self-acknowledged picaresque exploration of creative transformation needed in the modern university, goes further. She helps us join the dots between joint responsibility and an ethical imperative: 'It is only by exercising the ethical imagination and acknowledging the extent to which we are intertwined and entangled in a world of things,' she reminds us, 'that we can restore the ethical centre to the 'hollowed' out university' (Pirrie, 2018, preface p. 12). In practical terms, Magineess & MacKenzie (2018, p. 42) help us progress such restoration: 'One way in which we might cultivate compassionate regard,' they suggest, 'is to use the embodied experiences and suggestive capacities of literature to [re]imagine or [re]conceive beliefs or attitudes, to cultivate perception, discernment and responsiveness'.

Returning to Boyd's characterisation of narratives as stories that 'we continually recategorise and refine', Freire reminds us that, 'knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other' (Anon, 2018a). This is the place of 'chance encounters, missed opportunities, vague inklings, sudden rushes of excitement, trip and slips, falling down and getting up again that are part of ethical professional practice' (Pirrie, 2018, preface p. 2). The problem – amongst many – with deficit narratives is that they refuse recategorisation and definition. They refuse to engage the chance encounters, missed opportunities, vague inklings and so on. And they refuse to get up after falling down. Importantly, they stifle restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry. And how better could we describe the work and purpose of the academy than as 'restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry'? Our responsibility, therefore, has to be to reinvigorate the opportunity for such an inquiry. One way to do so is through narratives of hope.

When the overarching narrative of a university shifts toward employability, commercial imperatives and

industry needs – the ‘increasingly [focus] on the private, rather than the public good’ (Magineess & MacKenzie, 2018, p. 42) – and overwhelms narratives of scholarship and graduates as citizens, of critical thinking, of intellectual rigour and of social compassion – Etkowitz *et al.*’s (2000, p. 325) ‘evolution of ivory tower to entrepreneurial paradigm’ – this impacts on the entire agenda of work at the university and, to go to the core of the university, its intellectual foundations. And, as Pirrie reminds us, this impact is significant.

It is surely no coincidence that the distortions of the modern university have been brought about by the predominance of the business model of higher education. The result of this has been an increased emphasis on target setting, rigid systems of performance management and in the development of ever more sophisticated techniques of monitoring and surveillance. Contrary to the expectations of the architects of these widespread systemic changes, such developments have made it *considerably more difficult to get on with the deceptively straightforward business of doing good work well.* (Pirrie, 2018, preface pp. 1-2; emphasis added)

And yet, the employability, commercial, industry and private purpose holds fast in most aspects of the modern university’s work and being. This is despite what Waddington (2018, p. 87) reminds us about our universities, that they ‘still have a duty of care; a moral and legal obligation to ensure that everyone associated with the institution, whether this be students, employees or the general public, are fully protected from any personal physical and/or emotional harm ... [and that] care, kindness and compassion are not separate from being professional; rather, they represent the fundamentals of humanity in the workplace’. Given that, as Waddington also reminds us, ‘compassion is now a crucial and core concern in tertiary education’, it has to be possible to open a door to another future, to the university characterised by compassionate narratives of critical thinking, of citizenship, of shared responsibility of a true community. The question is now one, simply, of what such narratives can look like.

It is complicated, but there are several possibilities, several openings of, and for, opportunities of hope. We can turn to the commitment to a pedagogy of compassion. After all, it is possible to do so in the charged conditions of transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa (Vandeyar, 2013; Vandeyar & Swart, 2016). How can academics maintain their commitment to a pedagogy of compassion and to a teaching practice that speaks to the spirit of their students beyond, for example, employability goals? How can academics maintain their own spirits when surrounded by institutional constraints

and obligations? It is here that Paulo Freire (again!) speaks clearly and directly to the art of teaching and the deep emotional and spiritual commitment it entails.

I understand the process of teaching as an act of love. I mean, it is not an act of love in the formal sense, and never in the bureaucratic sense. It is an act of love as an expression of good care, a need to love, first of all, what you do. Can you imagine how painful it is to do anything without passion, to do everything mechanically? (Darder, 2002, p. 92)

Another approach might be to draw established university practices to guide us towards a compassionate perspective? The well-established, and establishment, realm of human research ethics offers principles that can be extended well beyond the remits of human research (Boyd, 2014). Human research, it is widely acknowledged, is bound by principles of respect and codes of behaviour, principles and codes that could – we suggest should – be adopted in the day-to-day running of an institution such as a university. These could and would guide a new age of morally and socially responsible and respectful behaviour in the institution. Principles such as merit, integrity, justice, beneficence and respect (Anon, 2018b) must surely guide us towards a compassionate workplace. To be meaningful, these well-accepted but purely abstract concepts need to be tangible and palpable. They need to be visible as practice and material in the workplace. What do they look like? What do they sound like? What do they feel like? The answers can be deceptively simple. They look like work and work processes that are fair and just, that do not impose stress on people, and that are honest and true to the purpose of the job. They sound like language that acknowledges people’s humanity, that praises and acknowledges from the heart, and that respects each employee’s individuality. They feel like joy at, and from, work, not just tolerance of too few hours for too much work. They look, sound and feel like, in the words of Paulo Freire, acts of love. As he, yet again, reminded us, ‘it is impossible to teach without the courage to love, ... it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented and well-thought-out capacity to love’ (Freire, 1998, p. 3).

Perhaps our universities need to consider what this looks like as an institution. And in doing so, they may discover acts of compassion and love that can, as one of us has previously suggested, ‘realistically reflect the diverse, troublesome and contingent contexts of academics’ desires to engage’ in their work as academics (Boyd *et al.*, 2012, p. 13). They may even discover a shared narrative, a collaborative moment, in which compassion ensures that, as has also been previously demonstrated (Boyd *et al.*, 2013, p. 37, emphasis added),

'the narrator's story gets told, that it is acknowledged as being *an authentic telling of the narrator's experience*, the collaborative process enhances this as a ... *mutual storytelling and restorying* ...'. In suggesting this possibility, we share Pirrie's (2018, preface p. 12) vision of reinvigorating relationships in a way that 'reconciles care about each other – about each and every one of us – and care about performance [read the daily activities of being an academic]'. Universities which can demonstrate their compassionate credentials will be successful universities (Waddington, 2018), although this will require 'kindness in leadership and compassionate institutional cultures ... their leaders ... to embody compassion in their leadership practice ... and be a shared approach' (p. 87). Waddington has a vision of universities 'characterised by openness, curiosity, kindness, authenticity, appreciation and above all compassion'. This 'more socially-oriented concept of compassion' advocated by Caddell & Wilder (2018, p. 14) shifts the emphasis from individual academics – their 'personal resilience, ... work-life balance, and ... soft-skills to manage everyday interactions' – to 'a fresh perspective from which to explore the everyday interactions within the university and consider the practical and political steps required to create supportive work environments'.

It is too much to ask for a return to being 'jointly responsible for a process in which all grow'? And is it too much to ask for what Trail & Cunningham (2018) simply call 'The Compassionate University'?

Postscript

As this article was being finalised for publication, the *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice* published a Special Issue on Compassionate Pedagogy (2018, 6 (3)). Readers are encouraged to explore further (<https://jpaap.napier.ac.uk/index.php/JPAAP/issue/view/23>).

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