

## *Embedding and Assessing Compassion in the University Curriculum*

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### **Abstract**

Scholarship in psychology (Gilbert, P., 2009; Neff, 2003; Kirkpatrick et al, 2007), anthropology (Goetz et al, 2010) and neuroscience (Immordino Yang et al, 2009; Stanford University's CCARE) agree compassion to be: the noticing of distress of others and a commitment to reduce that. Together, these disciplines are advancing research on how the secular concept of compassion can be applied into local and global social systems for building more co-operative and integrated societies. Disappointingly, Higher Education (HE) is failing to acknowledge or translate this scholarship into practical pedagogy. Instead, its model of 'excellence' still over-emphasises individualistic competitiveness – an increasingly questionable attribute for proliferating group work in 21<sup>st</sup> century HE. This places psychosocial stressors on students that impede the task-focussed thinking processes that HE is meant to promote in student group work. This paper reports outcomes of a study of how these stressors, occurring in group discussion practice in seminars/tutorials, are articulated by students and tutors. Focus groups and interviews amongst students (n=34) and tutors (n=9) were conducted in two departments of a UK university: the Humanities and Business. Template analysis identified themes from the data. Also, on an ethnically diverse module of (n=38) students, a comparative statistical analysis of all individual, assessed, critical thinking performances was conducted after students were supported and assessed in their ability to notice distress or disadvantaging of others and address it during seminars. It showed no attainment gap for critical thinking between the BME/white local students. The study informs theory, practice and policy in HE.

Keywords: compassion, seminars, discussions, micro-ethnography, critical thinking

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This paper draws on an action research study conducted in seminars and tutorials across a range of subjects in a UK university. The study embedded a required attention, by students and tutors, to the secular concept of compassion in their seminars. It then observed the results through a series of data collection methods. It is agreed within anthropology (Goetz et al, 2010), group psychotherapy (Bates, 2005; P. Gilbert, 2009) and neuroscience (Immordino Yang et al., 2009), that compassion can be defined as the noticing of distress in others, and a commitment to reduce it. This is two components, or psychologies.

As a world institution, Higher Education (HE) has a key remit to serve the public good (Chickering, 2010), and so it must articulate what *collective thinking for a world in conflict* means in how it educates its graduates for global citizenry. Chickering (2010) observes a persistent, neo liberal nurturing by Higher Education of individualistic competitiveness and private enterprise in the education of students. They pay hard cash to participate in what he refers to in his conclusion as “cold blooded intellectual exercises.” (p5). The situation is driving the institution away from its duty of serving the public good. Elsewhere, increasing levels of competitive stress are cited as a key cause of rising levels of depression and anxiety amongst students (P. Gilbert et al, 2004) that university counselling services are struggling to cope with. The UK’s National Union of Students (2009), surveyed 938 BME students (local black students, local ethnic minority students, and international students) for their accounts of their academic experiences in FE and HE. The results identified that 23% found their experiences “cliquey”, 17% “isolating” and 8% “hostile”. Respondents were often speaking of “alienation and exclusion” (p4). Many of these experiences “spawned from inside the classroom”, not least because these students reported “feeling left out of discussions and debates.” (p4). In light of these student stressors<sup>1</sup>, the NUS urges universities and colleges to “better integrate their student bodies...by increasing discussion and interactive work within the classroom” (p61).

This is a valuable recommendation in relation to the current BME attainment gap in the UK, because as Paul Gilbert (2005; 2013) and Cozolino (2013) both suggest, if individuals do not have a sense of social safeness in groups, their cognitive capacities are drained away into personal social defence mechanisms instead. This is an evolutionarily determined universal in human social stress response (Gilbert, 2009). That is, it is not confined to one ethnic group of people or another. The problem is that stressmediated impediments to communicative ease in task focussed groups - to offer diverse perspectives, questions, challenges and ideas - will inevitably also impair the quality of critical thinking processes across the group. Stressors to communicative ease to venture more, socially and intellectually, can be particularly acute in seminar and tutorial environments where students are tasked with timed exchanges while also being observed for personal performance competitiveness by peers and tutors.

I argue that we need to look even more closely at these stressors that the NUS cites; that is, at identifying them from the teeming psychosocial processes that occur in the

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<sup>1</sup> Creel, (2001) rightly points out that even amongst biologists, stress can have a number of

seminar room.<sup>2</sup> This close observation of what stresses people is the first component of compassion.

From conducting several surveys at the University of Hertfordshire around 200 students provided data that identified their main stressors inside the seminar (or tutorial room) and these were used to construct the following checklist in Fig 1. The checklist was then used to deliver compassion-focussed pedagogy in seminars that were being conducted on different disciplines and subjects.

**Fig 1. Student-identified stressors in the seminar room.**

1. Talking a lot so that others do not get many chances to speak.
2. Talking in silences when the shyest students are getting ready to speak.
3. Fixing eye contact with the tutor only, or just one student and forgetting to look at all the other people in the group.
4. Using difficult language; not explaining difficult words or expressions so that other people in the group cannot understand
5. Not listening carefully to other peoples' ideas
6. Not helping other people when they are getting into difficulty while they are speaking. Instead taking control and their chance to speak away from them. Talking over them.
7. Not inviting others to speak; not thanking others for their contribution.
8. Not speaking at all; becoming 'too shy' and so giving nothing to the group.
9. Not even reading a little bit in order to bring something to the discussion.
10. Letting other people talk and talk without interrupting them.
11. Letting them use difficult words or expressions. Allowing them to speak too fast for everyone to understand them.
12. Not asking for more explanations when understanding is becoming too difficult.
13. Other: .....

Notably, the students providing this data were mainly local, white Humanities students, and this makes an interesting comparison with the NUS findings amongst BME students. To be clear, for pedagogical purposes, the check list was then

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the kind of seminar/tutorial room where small group discussions are run is an ideal setting for the close ethnographic study of psychosocial processes in student 'collaborative' group work.

distributed to students in their first compassion-focussed seminars on a range of modules for them to tick which of those they had encountered in previous seminars, or indeed to identify what they felt they did themselves. Enabling students to then discuss together in small groups what, if anything, they had ticked on their individual checklists allowed them to validate each other's experiences (Leahy, 2005). The purpose was to raise to the surface otherwise potentially hidden narratives (Scott, 1990) on seminar experiences and this was done through encouraging students' to openly identify and share with others any experience, or not, of these stressors, and also to discuss together how and when others might also be experiencing these in the seminar room.

This does not constitute an unrealistic and unnecessary requirement of students to feel immediate emotional responses to the distress of others. On the contrary, this first component of compassion can be understood to be a deliberative process instead. In their study on empathy in the brain, Krishnan et al (2016:1) has found that *mentalising* is key to empathising with others, not emotion. "The patterns of brain activity that arose when the volunteers observed someone else in pain ... activated regions involved in taking another person's perspective. This process, which is known as mentalising, involves thinking about the other person's thoughts, intentions and preferences. Thus within the brain, the experience of observing someone else in pain is distinct from that of experiencing physical pain in oneself." These findings align with those of Immordino-Yang et al, (2009) who researched compassionate brain responses to others' distress.

The point of the pedagogy described above then is not to induce emotional responses necessarily, but deliberative ones, such as by intentionally raising alertness to the possibility of distress, and/or the disadvantaging of others which can then cause distress. The point is, it is not easy for a student to address another's distress in group work, if s/he does not, or cannot, notice it; or if s/he has noticed it but does not or cannot acknowledge it. This situation may be linked to Chickering's observations of the high value HE's places on individualistic competitiveness – focus on the self.

Further investigation amongst 34 students in focus groups and in one-to-one loosely structured interviews was carried out. Five sampling methods were used (Maximum Variation, Theoretical, Disconfirming/confirming, Emergent, Convenience).

The participants in the School (Department) of Humanities were all white local students (n=14). The participants in the Business School were mixed - white local, black local, ethnic minority local and international (n = 20) (Gilbert T, 2016). Where required, explicitly compassionate attention to others in student seminars was largely absent, that is, in non compassion-focussed seminars (control seminars), it was found that stressors for white students appeared to be very similar in key aspects to those of the BME students in the NUS report above. This confirmed the findings of the surveys of circa 200 students at the University of Hertfordshire, also noted above. One of these areas of similarity related to experiencing, or witnessing, 'exclusion' - a key stressor for BME students (NUS, 2009). In one to one interviews, tutors' (n=9) accounts of what they noticed of seminar discussion room dynamics were also sought, including in terms of what they identified to be stressors for students during task focussed, small group discussions.

The following typical accounts of stressors were given by tutors, and by white local, black local, ethnic minority local and international students. These were accounts of behaviours observed and/or experienced in non compassion-focussed seminars. The data indicated a little more precisely what seminar participants might usefully stay alert to noticing. This is the first component of compassion. They would then know what it was that they should *address*. This is the second component of compassion:

*T4: So many students – and I’ve never sort of realised this before - are sort of really frightened about saying something, or they can’t say something or they think it’s better not to say something.*<sup>3</sup>

This white, local UK student of Eastern European origin said:

*S19 .... sometimes when I meet people for the first time I feel I get really shy ... so if I was in a seminar and I didn’t know anyone then like I feel a bit weirded out...I’ll be like ‘I don’t need to talk to anyone.’*<sup>4</sup>

A white Humanities female student noticed that in non compassion-focussed seminars:

*S4: ... it’s just two or three people talking and that’s either because they’re taking over, or because people are too shy...*<sup>5</sup>

It appears shy students did try to speak though, as this white female was suggesting:

*S3... some people try to talk over you. So you try to say something, and they’ll cut in, so like you’re finally getting something out, and no one hears; they only hear the other people who talk all the time....They don’t actually know the answer, they just talk and talk and talk.*<sup>6</sup>

And in another department, a white local male student commented that despite tutors’ efforts to create inclusive discussions:

*S26: ... it’s just a case of everyone trying to scoop up as many grades as they can and normally people feel the only way to do that is by talking a lot and sort of hogging the spotlight.*<sup>7</sup>

A seminar tutor on a different module than any of the students above had also observed this:

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<sup>3</sup> T4, interview transcript, p3, lines 105-108

<sup>4</sup> S17, S18, S19, focus group transcript, page 2, lines 80-85

<sup>5</sup> S4 UG female, joint interview transcript, p3, lines 59-60

<sup>6</sup> S3, UG female, one to one interview transcript, p9, lines 252-255

<sup>7</sup> S26 Local white male, focus group transcript, p3 lines 77-78

T3 : *Four or five students who don't mind talking out loud ... just dominate...they get the chance to demonstrate their knowledge... but they don't actually get much in the way of discussion with other students.*<sup>8</sup>

This ethnic minority student suggested one reason why this can happen:

S23: *... it's more closed in - you're not sharing your work. You're doing your own work. It's all you know. That's the problem with seminars.*<sup>9</sup>

Encouraging shy students to speak was thought to be an unacceptable stressor, in itself, by this international male business student:

S16: *No, no, no. The other students will think, 'He's the same as me, so who do [sic] he think he is?'*<sup>10</sup>

### **A strategy for the second component of compassion**

Something that multi-disciplinary review of the literature suggests is particularly important for group cohesion and quality of critical thinking, is *inclusive eye contact* (Vertegaal et al, 2002; 2003). Students were therefore encouraged to use this; that is, they were asked to look, especially whenever they spoke, at everyone in the group. They were requested, and reminded throughout the seminars on the module, *not* to fix eye contact with one person only, no matter how safe locking eye contact with just one other person might feel.

Though there was overall a complete recovery from a tendency of some students when speaking to look at one person only, typical data on initial feelings of discomfort at inclusive eye contact were these:

T3: *The eye contact ... a very good strategy... [is] the most valuable. And yet in the third year it's still the hardest thing for them to do.*<sup>11</sup>

S20, an international student (Thai) female also struggled although, interestingly her Thai female friend (S21) did not:

S20: *I can find it weird because I'm answer the questions to someone who ask me and does anybody else want to know? [sic] (S20 and S21, both Thai females, laugh.)*<sup>12</sup>

This white male Humanities student said:

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<sup>8</sup> T3 male seminar tutor, , one to one interview transcript, p2, lines 21-28

<sup>9</sup> S23 Local ethnic minority male, mid module focus group 1 transcript, p5, lines 118-122

<sup>10</sup> S16 International/Malaysian male, joint interview with S15, transcript p7, lines 65-66

<sup>11</sup> T3 one-to-one interview transcript, p3, Lines 87-88

<sup>12</sup> S20 Local ethnic minority male, mid module focus group 1 transcript, p4 Lines 78-82

S9: *I tend to peer down when trying to look at students when contributing in the discussion because I feel nervous about something, and if I say something that's inarticulate or doesn't communicate it will make me feel stupid to the rest of the students.*<sup>13</sup>

In effect, S9, like other students when first introduced to the compassion-focussed seminar pedagogy, was cutting himself off from signals of interest, enquiry or support from other students, by avoiding their eye contact as much as he initially did. These were signals that students were encouraged in their compassion focussed seminars to offer to anyone who was speaking – nodding, leaning in, smiling in encouragement where appropriate. In the compassion focussed seminars on modules participating in the study, students appeared to become increasingly sensitive, adept and generous with these signals. As S9 was not able to see these signals much of the time because of his avoidant eye contact, they could not potentially, calm his anxiety and thus his thinking processes (P. Gilbert, 2013; Cozolino, 2013). Thus S9's data supported an interesting view from seminal group psychotherapist, Yalom (1985, p342): that people who monopolise or take over discussions *as S9 tended to*, could be doing so from anxiety, not confidence (although Yalom did not investigate eye contact in relation to this).

Overall, the extent of disconnection between students, and the urgency with which it needs to be addressed, is suggested by a several accounts similar to this one from an ethnic minority female. She is recounting her experiences of seminars that were not focussed on compassion (in its above definition):

S24: *I mean S26 has been doing my course for a whole year. I'd never noticed him [or] even S25. ... I'd just sit there.... I would miss some of my tutorials [seminars] because I didn't wanna be there... I didn't know anyone there and I felt like no one would speak to me... i*<sup>14</sup>

And from another ethnic minority female whose behaviour here in non-compassion focussed seminars was, she observed, very different from her behaviour in compassion focussed seminars:

S28: *When I go into seminars I find any other Muslim people there.... Most of the others, I'm probably not gonna talk to them to be honest.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> S9 Local white male, focus group transcript, p1, lines 9-10

<sup>14</sup> S24 Local ethnic minority female, post assessment focus group, p8, lines 243-249

<sup>15</sup> S28 Local ethnic minority female, mid module focus group transcript, p5, lines 133-135

When this student attended her first compassion-focussed seminar where students mixed their group membership every week in their discussion her stressor was again, the possibility of being excluded:

*S28: I was thinking, 'Oh my God. What if no-one talks to me?' But as soon as I got into a group I was fine, I was fine. ... I did the research so I was really lucky.<sup>16</sup> We just got into the discussion and took it from there. It flowed really well.<sup>17</sup>*

The difficulty with these data is that no student complained of any tutor being particularly negligent of inclusivity. And yet, in terms of the difficult student group dynamics explored above, a tutor noted after many years of paying attention to inclusivity in his class room that:

*T3: The dynamics get set very quickly ...After a couple of weeks it's quite hard to change that dynamic.<sup>18</sup>*

Thus, students on the compassion focussed seminars run on participating modules in the Humanities and Business Schools respectively, were assessed in their final small seminar/tutorial group discussions. This was to provide them with practice at bringing evidence of their independent reading on the previous lectures' topic to the seminar table each week, to share information with others. The marking criteria is therefore as shown below in Fig 2. It has been endorsed by seven out of seven external examiners involved in the research to date.

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<sup>16</sup> The compassion-focussed seminars of the study were based on independent reading by each student (not set reading for all); usually on the topic of an earlier lecture on the module. This sharing of information by each student in a new discussion group each week, of around four students, was in order to maximise students' inter dependence amongst, expectations of, and assistance to, each other for learning experience.

<sup>17</sup> S28 Local ethnic minority female, mid module focus group transcript, p5, lines 110-115

<sup>18</sup> T3 male, one-to-one interview transcript, page 15, lines 426-427

**Fig 2. Small group, research-based discussion: Marking criteria**

***Small Group, Research-based Discussion***

**Student:** ..... **Candidate No:** ..... **Date:** .....

**Tutor:** ..... **Module** ..... **Code:** .....

<b>Content (70%)</b>		
<b>The research</b> undertaken by the candidate for the examination topic is demonstrated to be extensive; it is appropriate in content, level and relevance. <b>(30%)</b>	A   B   C   D   E   F	Little or no evidence is offered of sufficient and/or appropriate research.
<b>Critical perspectives</b> - as in questions posed, arguments offered, analytical and or evaluative insights into the student's own research and that contributed by others - are integrated relevantly and helpfully into the group discussion. The student helps keep the group focussed on task. <b>(40%)</b>	A   B   C   D   E   F	<b>Few or no critical perspectives</b> – as in questions posed, arguments offered, analytical or evaluative insights into the student's own research and that contributed by others – are demonstrated during the discussion. The student may contribute little by remaining silent, or else may input in ways that lead the group off task.
<b>Group Management Skills (30%)</b>		
<b>Body Language (10%)</b> Eye contact and other body language is appropriately inclusive.	A   B   C   D   E   F	<b>Body language</b> is signalling little interest or engagement with what is being said by others; or, may focus repeatedly on some students to the exclusion of others.
<b>Language (10%) is graded (it is international English and it is appropriately paced). It is also mindful in other aspects when:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disagreeing and/or critiquing</li> <li>Questioning</li> <li>Enacting inclusivity skills (see below)</li> </ul>	A   B   C   D   E   F	<b>Student may:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>speak too fast; or too quietly</li> <li>use excluding, localised English</li> <li>use inappropriately individualistic or disrespectful language when challenging or questioning others, or when enacting some group management strategies.</li> </ul>
<b>Group management strategies (10%)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eliciting, encouraging, acknowledging</li> <li>Accommodating reasonable hesitations/silences while less confident speakers are engaging the group's attention</li> <li>Checking understanding of the group when speaking</li> <li>Intervening proactively and compassionately in the excluding behaviours of others, e.g. monopolising</li> </ul>	A   B   C   D   E   F	<b>Student may:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>tend to monopolise discussion or speak over others</li> </ul> <b>Student may</b> make little or no attempt to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>check the group's understanding (of his/her own research) e.g. when presenting an unfamiliar term/concept</li> <li>get clarification when it is needed during presentations</li> <li>listen to and respond relevantly to others</li> <li>proactively support the efforts of others to contribute effectively to group task achievement.</li> </ul>

**Comments:**

**First assessor**..... **Second assessor** .....

**Grade:** .....

## **Impacts of the CfP<sup>19</sup> on Critical Thinking as a key marker of academic achievement**

In a module of 38 students including white local, black local, ethnic minority local and international students, Mann Whitney and Fisher tests were run on each student's performance in critical thinking, first in an essay and then in the assessed CfP seminar discussion. Both assignments were set up on the same module and were double marked by the same two subject tutors (not the researcher). Statistically, it was found that for critical thinking there was no evidence of the current circa 18% academic attainment gap between BME and local white students. BME and white participants provided key qualitative data explaining why, in their views, this had been found (Gilbert, T. *forthcoming*).

## **Conclusion**

There are under researched difficulties with the little understood psychosocial processes that unfold in group work amongst students. A major difficulty is that while some kinds of stress may be beneficial, the student stressors explored here in timed, task focussed discussion work are clearly less as is suggested in the literature on thinking processes and acute stress. The evidence explored above strongly suggests the point and value of HE's reconsideration of what *kinds* of competition it rewards in the education of 21<sup>st</sup> century graduates.

Seminars are key to supporting and training students in strategies for working productively in groups outside the class room. They are underused resources and forums for the study of group psychosocial processes, for how these processes mediate social and learning experiences in groups, and for how they mediate the quality and speed of critical thinking processes in groups. In these crucial processes, the noticing of distress of group members and reduction of their distress is directly addressed by the concept of compassion that is embedded, assessed and credit bearing on university degree programmes. That is, it is institutionally endorsed. The greatest barrier to this appears to be not in a perennially fashionable deficit model of this or that category of students. It could instead be, as Chickering (2010) fears, in HE's drift further towards neo liberalism and further away from serving the public good. This may be why, in terms of the science and application of compassion for building collaborative societies, Higher Education has been left behind by its sister disciplines.

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<sup>19</sup> CfP: Compassion-focussed pedagogy in seminars.

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