

## A Pedagogy of Possibility: Kindness as a Framework for Transformative Education

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Catherine J. Denial's *A Pedagogy of Kindness* compellingly interrogates the challenges and latent opportunities within contemporary higher education, and her insights resonate deeply with my own experiences as a graduate student and instructor. Denial's analysis begins with a critique of what she terms the insufficiency of "niceness" in academia—an ideal often heralded as foundational to collegiality, yet one that frequently masks the entrenched inequities shaping institutional life. Against this, she articulates a transformative ethos of kindness, one that is neither superficial nor sentimental, but anchored in the imperatives of social justice. This re-orientation demands that educators engage in practices that actively center student experiences and dismantle structural impediments to inclusion and success, practices that have acquired renewed urgency in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Denial's intervention joins a growing body of scholarship that seeks to embed care and compassion within pedagogical praxis (see Gibbs 2017; Roy 2022; Wilde 2013).<sup>1</sup> Her project thus shifts kindness from the realm of interpersonal affect into the domain of structural change. In this context, kindness becomes a practice of material reconfiguration, a call to rethink not only the architecture of syllabi and the mechanisms of assessment, but also the affective and epistemological conditions of the classroom itself. Education, Denial suggests, is not a transaction but a relationship. Thus, kindness demands that educators integrate underrepresented epistemologies, adopt strategies of accessibility and adaptability, and cultivate forms of collaboration that undo hierarchical dynamics. These are not "tick-box" exercises in diversity and inclusivity, but a holistic commitment to ensuring that every student can meaningfully engage, contribute, and succeed.

As a graduate instructor at Texas Tech University (TTU), I have witnessed how such efforts can reshape educational spaces. Arriving in the fall of 2021, a semester marked by the first substantial resumption of in-person instruction, I encountered a teaching environment deeply shaped by the lingering exigencies of the pandemic. The First Year Writing program, where I then taught, foregrounded principles aligned with Denial's model of kindness, emphasizing the significance of attending to students' material conditions and personal well-being. Absences, delayed submissions, and

diminished engagement were not pathologized but understood as symptomatic of broader conditions—illness, long COVID, economic precarity, and familial responsibilities—that structured students’ lives. These principles remain central to my current teaching in fiction and drama, where I strive to cultivate spaces of empowerment and support.

This call for flexibility and understanding complements Denial’s emphasis on trust as a cornerstone of pedagogical practice. In particular, she invites educators to interrogate our assumptions and confront the sense of suspicion that often underpins relationships with students. My own teaching has not been immune to such dynamics; I have, at times, designed curricula shaped by an anxiety about student failure or impropriety, instituting policies aimed less at fostering growth than at preempting or penalizing lapses. But Denial reminds us that students are not adversaries; they do not enter our classrooms with the intention to cheat or with “a commitment to fighting, judging, or hating us.”<sup>2</sup> Like her, I have slowly discovered that trusting students—believing that “our students experience loss, and laptops genuinely do crash, and there can be a glitch in the learning management system, and people get sick”<sup>3</sup>—does not invite exploitation. Instead, it creates the conditions for mutual respect, consideration, and a shared commitment to learning. In this sense, kindness is not a weakness but a strength, a willingness to affirm students’ experiences even in the face of uncertainty.

Denial, however, does not limit her focus to kindness extended outward to students; she also insists on the necessity of self-kindness for educators. She challenges the valorization of overwork endemic to academic culture, its glorification of unsustainable productivity as an ideal of professional excellence. Denial critiques the commodified logic of self-care that circulates within this framework, identifying it as a tool of neoliberal management rather than a means of addressing the systemic causes of burnout. In its stead, she imagines self-kindness as a mode of sustainability, an ethical practice oriented toward long-term well-being so that “our future self will appreciate what we’ve done.”<sup>4</sup> Her advice—setting boundaries, taking restorative breaks, cultivating networks of support, and others—demands to be understood not as indulgence but as an ethical necessity, a precondition for the work of transformative teaching.

Perhaps the most resonant aspect of *A Pedagogy of Kindness* lies in its insistence on the iterative nature of teaching itself. I am prone to teleological thinking, the notion that I might attain a definitive end state of teaching excellence (and stay there!). Denial’s work dismantles this view and its logic of finality and closure, and instead contends that teaching is a dynamic, continuous, and open-ended process. For graduate students and junior faculty, who are often haunted by imposter syndrome, perfectionist

ideals, and the allure of immediate mastery, this is particularly salient. Kindness in this framework challenges the tendency toward surveillance and judgement and instead emphasizes growth and learning. Mistakes are not always or only failures; they are opportunities for regeneration, so as long as we forgive ourselves, take accountability, and remain committed to defaulting to “the kind thing, the just thing, the equitable thing.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet for all its transformative potential, Denial’s text leaves certain questions unresolved. Specifically, I find myself returning to the problem of student resistance: How does one navigate the dissonance between participatory, student-centered pedagogies and the expectations of students wedded to traditional, hierarchical models of education? For several years I taught at the Global Citizenship Programme, a co-curricular initiative based in the Center for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa. Inspired by popular education methodologies, we eschewed traditional lecture-based formats in favor of workshop-style learning. We invited activists and civil society groups to serve as co-educators in the classroom, and centered students’ personal experiences to anchor our conversations about inequality, gentrification, environmental injustice, and other topics of global and local import.

While many students ultimately thrived in this environment, initial reactions were often marked by skepticism or hostility. Practices such as co-creating classroom norms, intended to democratize the learning process, were sometimes dismissed as irrelevant. My colleagues’ and my own commitment to acknowledging the limits of our expertise was occasionally taken as an unwelcome breach of the established educational contract, in which one party is the provider of knowledge and the other its (passive) recipient. Our attempts to foreground students’ lived realities were at times deemed frivolous or highly discomfoting, and our use of colorful props and interactive activities was once derided as “playing games.” These instances highlight the difficulty of disturbing entrenched pedagogical norms, when kindness meets resistance, when students reject our efforts, or when they find our methods unsettling or unserious.

Due to our location within CILT, my colleagues and I had the time and institutional support needed to address these challenges creatively and intentionally. However, many educators in more conventional settings may lack such resources. While *A Pedagogy of Kindness* provides a robust foundation for reimagining classroom dynamics, it mostly seems to assume that students themselves are always-already receptive to alternative modes of teaching and learning. Denial’s argument would thus benefit from a deeper engagement with the practical strategies necessary to navigate student resistance. How do we teach radically in a system that often opposes change?

How do we prepare students for one kind of classroom when the others they encounter remain committed to orthodox hierarchies and disciplinary norms? And how can discomfort and the unfamiliar—inevitable byproducts of this kind of work—be mobilized as productive forces rather than sites of alienation or irritation? These questions remain critical to any project of transformative pedagogy, and I would have welcomed a more sustained exploration of them within Denial’s work.

Despite this limitation, *A Pedagogy of Kindness* stands as a vital contribution to the ongoing reimagining of teaching and learning. Denial’s vision of kindness as a transformative practice reframes the educator’s role—not as a repository of knowledge but as a facilitator of shared intellectual and affective growth. This work demands vulnerability, persistence, and imagination; yet it offers profound rewards, fostering environments in which students are not only equipped to succeed academically but also affirmed in their dignity as individuals. As Denial reminds us, “our job is not simply to teach content but to teach people.”<sup>6</sup> In embracing kindness as both method and principle, educators create spaces of possibility, where learning becomes a collective endeavor and where students are prepared to navigate the world with a sense of complexity, interdependence, and care.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gibbs, ed., *The Pedagogy of Compassion at the Heart of Higher Education* (New York, NY: Springer International Publishing, 2017); Debarshi Roy, *Empathy-Driven School Systems: Nature, Concept and Evolution* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2022); Sandra Wilde, *Care in Education: Teaching with Understanding and Compassion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Catherine J. Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2024), 81.

<sup>3</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 103.

<sup>4</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 63.