

## Paper Clips and Lunch Breaks: Tiny Tweaks and a Pedagogy of Kindness

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In August 2024, Catherine Denial, Bright Distinguished Professor of American History at Knox College, posted the following on the social media site Bluesky: “Good morning to everyone starting out a new school year today. Remember that if you accidentally write on the white board with a sharpie, you can write over the sharpie words with an erasable marker and all of it will wipe clean. You got this!”<sup>1</sup> As of January 2025, the post has accumulated 73 reposts, 276 “likes,” a “mind blown” emoji, and various comments such as “Wait wut,” “Wait, that works?,” and “Heroine work here.” A couple of scientists even chimed in with technical details about ink as a solvent and Sharpie as an alcohol-based product.

Amidst the wide range of academic social media content circulating late last summer—including crucial conversations about college closures, suppressions of student and faculty activism, and the ever-accelerating casualization of academic labor—Denial’s Sharpie post was surprisingly attention-grabbing. Denial not only shared a handy classroom tip (who knew?!), but also gave voice to the kinds of anxieties that many instructors, even long-time ones, experience at the beginning of the semester. While the multiple, ongoing crises in higher education are never far from mind, many teachers’ concerns on the first day of school are much more quotidian: Will my laptop dongle work? Is there enough juice in my whiteboard marker? Will the projector burn out? Denial’s Bluesky post acknowledged these on-the-ground concerns—and, given the comments it sparked, created a sense of community around the day-to-day practicalities of teaching. The post was, in short, a gesture of kindness.

Denial adopts a similarly generous approach in *A Pedagogy of Kindness*. (Indeed, the Sharpie tip appears on page 25!) In the book, which is based on a 2019 *Hybrid Pedagogy* essay of the same name, Denial advocates for kindness as a discipline and a source of social justice in higher education. According to Denial, most college instructors are trained (if they are trained in pedagogy at all) to view students as antagonists—to enact draconian attendance and late-work policies and automatically suspect students of cheating. A pedagogy of kindness, instead, involves “believ[ing] students” and “believ[ing] in students.”<sup>2</sup> Denial details her own thought

process as she sought to unlearn her initial approach: “Why? Why did I posit my students as passive novices who couldn’t contribute to their own learning? Why did I require students to jump through hoops to prove that they deserved an extension on a paper? Why did I dock points if my students missed three classes in a term?”<sup>3</sup> Denial argues that instructors must also extend this kind approach to their colleagues and to themselves, centering care and compassion as integral components of academic life.

Crucially, for Denial, kindness is *not* niceness. A pedagogy of kindness is not about keeping the peace or staying “positive” in the face of the real, material harms that academic institutions often inflict; rather, it is centered on a profound commitment to building better worlds both inside and outside of the academy. The stakes of *unkind* pedagogy are high; authoritarian pedagogical approaches can serve as “small cog[s] in the enormous machine of colonialism, racism, queerphobia, misogyny, and ableism that harm so many people.”<sup>4</sup>

Denial acknowledges that combating these “isms” in higher education can feel impossible. But, as *A Pedagogy of Kindness* makes clear, even small interventions—tiny teaching tweaks—can go a long way towards creating a better academy for students and faculty. One of the most important contributions of the book, to my mind, is the way in which Denial finds liberatory potential in the smallest minutiae of teaching life: the everyday classroom practices and administrative tasks that make up the majority of instructors’ days. By emphasizing the large payoffs of small pedagogical adjustments, Denial makes a pedagogy of kindness *accessible* and *actionable* to a wide range of college instructors, many of whom are facing impossible labor conditions of precarity, overwork, burnout, and political backlash. Denial suggests starting small: “Take a couple of these ideas and weave them into your own classroom practice. Blend them with the commitments you already have. Change part of your syllabus if changing everything seems too much.”<sup>5</sup> By sharing hyper-specific strategies and encouraging readers to adopt them in ways that work for them, Denial’s book puts into practice the kindness she espouses.

Denial’s approach reflects key principles of critical and feminist pedagogy. As bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress*, “[I]t is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention . . . we often have no concrete examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern with teaching practices.”<sup>6</sup> Below, I will discuss a few of the specific “terrains” that Denial maps out in *A Pedagogy of Kindness*.

As Denial shows, instructors can implement kind pedagogy even before the first day of class. For instance, instructors can set up a learning management system (LMS) that “communicate[s] that we are invested in a student’s whole person” by including self-care resources like coloring pages and student zines, a “Start Here” section, and a video introduction with text transcription.<sup>7</sup> Denial suggests writing students a welcome letter that includes information on where to meet, what to bring to class, and what the agenda will be for the first day—details that alleviate many students’ anxieties and are “especially important for those neurodivergent students for whom routines and predictability are key to their success.”<sup>8</sup> This culture of welcome and care continues once everyone is in the classroom. For instance, Denial suggests that instructors refrain from taking roll for risk of deadnaming trans, agender, genderqueer, or nonbinary students; instead, she proposes the use of name tents or tags, Google forms, or sign-in sheets (or even Lego figurines!).<sup>9</sup>

Another crucial first-day document—the syllabus—comprises a whole chapter of Denial’s book. For Denial, course syllabi can be “instruments of kindness”—relational documents that communicate instructors’ goals and values and invite student interaction.<sup>10</sup> Denial walks readers through the evolution of her syllabi over the years; she has added a greeting, her pronouns, visual icons to ease navigation, and information about her teaching philosophy. Her academic integrity statement now signals her belief in her students’ honesty and establishes a relationship based on trust. Her attendance policy now frames students “as collaborators in their learning” and acknowledges “their complicated lives.”<sup>11</sup> She replaced all instances of “I will” or “you will” with “we will”—another small change that signals her commitment to building a collaborative learning community. Denial lists campus and community resources on the syllabus and makes the document as accessible as possible by avoiding certain colors (such as red and green), incorporating alt text, and using screen-reader-compatible fonts.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, Denial teaches her readers *how* to implement these changes themselves; for example, she walks readers through the alt text process step by step: “right click on an image for a menu that includes the alt text choice on a PC, and on a Mac press CTRL and click your mouse on the image itself.”<sup>13</sup> In such moments, Denial enables even the most overwhelmed instructors to engage in a pedagogy of kindness, which can be practiced not only with sweeping changes to course content, but also with a few clicks of the mouse.

Denial also shares ways to enact a pedagogy of kindness with colleagues. Denial suggests practicing “pedagogical mutual aid” by sharing office supplies with colleagues who do not have budget lines or setting up a central fund for these items.<sup>14</sup> She even takes the time to list the specific

supplies teachers might need: “pens, pencils, Post-its, notepads, printer paper, staplers, staples, whiteboard markers, chalk, and, yes, paperclips for grad students, contingent faculty, and part-time workers.”<sup>15</sup> Such pedagogical mutual aid can also extend to a “collection of syllabi and sample assignments” (a strategy that Denial herself practices in this book by including so many of her own materials).<sup>16</sup> This hyper-concrete approach prompts readers to envision, in granular detail, what kindness might look like at their institutions, from creating a syllabus bank to dropping off some paper clips at the faculty lounge.

Finally, Denial emphasizes self-care as a key component of kind pedagogy. Resisting the commodified versions of self-care that have become so popular in mainstream media—and that deviate so dramatically from earlier framings of the term by Black feminist thinkers like Audre Lorde—Denial considers ways to “find and build the structures of care we need to flourish” for ourselves and others.<sup>17</sup> Among her suggestions are “Take time off from email,” “Take time off from work,” “Think creatively about your commute,” “Schedule time for eating and rest,” and “Build catch-up days into your courses.”<sup>18</sup> Denial’s concrete suggestions can help readers to envision specific moments in their days where they could practice more kindness towards themselves and their students: how might teachers set clearer expectations around email response times? How might they protect 10 minutes to actually eat our lunches on busy teaching days? Can they assign fewer readings and leave more catch-up days on the syllabus? Again, though, Denial is careful to emphasize that these strategies are not merely for individualistic “self-help” purposes; rather, they are crucial practices that, when collectively implemented, can contribute to a more just and caring academy. Denial writes, “We cannot lose sight of the enormous work ahead of us to make higher education welcoming, just, and achievable for everyone. But the things which we control are usually small; they’re the incremental decisions that can shape a day where we can implement changes that have a meaningful impact upon both our well-being and the store of compassion we have to direct elsewhere.”<sup>19</sup>

Denial’s work has certainly transformed my own teaching. I first encountered her *Hybrid Pedagogy* essay during my first semester on the tenure track in 2019, and I found myself returning to it again and again as I shaped my own courses. It was Denial’s essay, for instance, that inspired me to ditch a punitive attendance policy once and for all—a strategy that has worked shockingly well in over 15 classes to date. (Though this is a topic for a longer essay, I will note here that students routinely share that a non-punitive attendance policy makes them feel less stressed overall and actually *more* likely to attend class altogether.) Developing a pedagogy of kindness

is a decades-long process, and Denial offers countless actionable strategies for readers to incorporate over the course of their careers. This semester, for instance, I will try adding some more images to the syllabus, including a Gmail icon (as Denial suggests), and a picture of the building in which my office is located. Next year, I might add even more catch-up days to the course schedule. Though the challenges facing teachers today can feel insurmountable, Denial reminds her readers that it's not nothing to change syllabus fonts or share some Post-it notes—or to enter the classroom equipped with a Sharpie strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Cate Denial (@cjdenial.bsky.social), “Good morning to everyone starting out a new school year today. Remember that if you accidentally write on the white board with a sharpie, you can write over the sharpie words with an erasable marker and all of it will wipe clean. You got this!,” Bluesky, August 19, 2024, 6:18 a.m., <https://bsky.app/profile/cjdenial.bsky.social/post/3l22ul4b5vv2f>.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine J. Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2024), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 129–30.

<sup>7</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 83–84.

<sup>8</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 87–88.

<sup>10</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 26–32.

<sup>19</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 26.