

## Elevated Baseline Cognitive Load: When Pedagogical Kindness May Feel Unkind

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Between the time I was invited to write this critique and the time I actually picked up Cate Denial's fantastic book, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, I was in dire need of some kindness. In just a few short months, I experienced multiple serious medical emergencies, wasps invaded my basement, my car broke down and I was stranded without a car for a month in a place where cars are extremely necessary, I was bullied to tears by colleagues in a professional organization, and I uncovered and ousted a sexual predator from an important community of mine, among other things. The idea of engaging with something as intellectually challenging as reading, absorbing, and critiquing a well-regarded book was too exhausting to even consider. So, I put off writing even a draft of this response until far too late. How could I come up with something incisive or novel when I was struggling with planning the various aspects of navigating another medical procedure that's a three-plus-hour drive each way? How could I notice and feel my reactions to Cate's beautiful invitation to build a more kind academy amidst the chaos of my personal life? What meaning could I make while I was barely treading water? We'll come back to this. What follows is my deep appreciation of Cate's invitation to contribute to a kinder, more compassionate academy, followed by a reflection on the capacity students have to engage in this rebuilding and an invocation to do our best to support all of our students.

### **Appreciation: Kindness in the Academy is Necessary**

In *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, Cate Denial shares the deeply personal and vulnerable context that informs her ethos of kindness as not only a pedagogical value, but as a pedagogy of its own. In the introduction, Denial explains that niceness is a present-oriented activity, serving to minimize conflict in the moment, while kindness is a future-oriented activity, often requiring difficult conversations today to support ease and connection in the future. While this is not an entirely novel framing, the precise clarity with which Denial describes how kindness "is real, it's honest, and it demands integrity" makes the claim seem so obvious, in retrospect.<sup>1</sup> And, with so much care, Denial prepares us for the likely discomfort of grappling with

the contents of this book by reminding us of bell hooks's acknowledgement: "There can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches."<sup>2</sup>

Denial sets us up to be deeply invested in improving the educational experiences of students and the work experiences of ourselves and our colleagues. She does this by taking us on her journey through her career as an educator, highlighting the impact of her undergraduate and graduate education on her pedagogical choices as an instructor. Throughout, Denial mentions her previous distrust of her students, which was due, in large part, to the off-putting graduate student teaching assistant training she (and many graduate students) received while in graduate school. She emphasizes the ways in which instructors are navigating insecurities about how students perceive them, which can be rooted in real biases and inappropriate expectations.

Denial explains that when instructors maintain the status quo in the classroom, they contradict what we know about how people learn. As a result, we do not promote meaningful learning experiences, often because we are reproducing what we experienced as students. For example, Denial identifies that instructors often have certain expectations for assessment, but that those assessment strategies may not provide space for students to fully demonstrate their knowledge. Denial emphasizes using kindness to expand our vision of what assessment, teaching, and learning can be. Importantly, in doing so, Denial doesn't advise instructors to remove all expectations, due dates, and boundaries, but rather includes the presence of boundaries as another act of kindness. So often within discussions of shifting the nature of the academy, the burden of labor falls on faculty; and it is implied that faculty should burn themselves out in trying to make the academy a more equitable place. What Denial does so beautifully is highlight the importance of shifting the academy, while also recognizing that kindness starts within, and burning out is not kind to anyone.

Denial pairs her thoughts about how things should be with on-the-ground strategies collected from various faculty and staff across her networks. The strategies and approaches are used by real instructors, and while some strategies may not work for everyone, they provide concrete examples to help get your imagination spinning. For example, Denial explains, "We must take a hard look at what we're asking students to do and then identify if there is value in it. If there is not, we need to change our assessments. If there is, we need to be able to explain that value to students as clearly and directly as we can."<sup>3</sup> Next, Denial describes the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TiLT) framework popularized by Mary-Ann Winkelmes. Finally, Denial shares the beginning part of an assignment from Mary Armon, a math professor. Weaving together big-picture postures toward teaching

and learning with evidence-backed approaches and on-the-ground examples makes Denial's book an invitation to reframe how we approach the classroom and our students. For someone newer to reflecting on their pedagogy, this approach of moving from big-picture to actionable strategies is supportive and warm while still providing enough discomfort to shake us out of the status quo. And this works so effectively because Denial identifies the loop of kindness: As we change the posture we take towards our students, so do they change their expectations and experience of us. When we bring kindness, we invite our students to bring kindness, too.

We are not only teaching students the content of our courses, but also ways of thinking about our fields, as well as what agreements we are making when we enter into the academy. Mays Imad et al. has done phenomenal work<sup>4</sup> in considering what agreements we make and reproduce as we engage with the academy. These agreements, Imad argues, include privileging Eurocentric ways of knowing, scarcity in the academy, and objectivity. When we create policies that center kindness, we are choosing new agreements or amending the previous ones. In *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, Denial proposes new agreements to faculty, staff, and students, which are agreements I am eager to commit to.

Denial steadfastly commits to her agreement to engage in the tough conversations that kindness necessitates by directly naming the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on how we teach and learn. Importantly, the pandemic is not over, and Denial frames it as an ongoing challenge and risk to everyone in our places of living, learning, and working. This is, in itself, a courageous act of kindness: to be so seen by such a cherished colleague. Further, Denial's choice of naming the ongoing pandemic is another act of kindness that may result in real discomfort for many.

### **Reflection: One's Kindness Does Not Feel the Same to Everyone**

Just as *A Pedagogy of Kindness* invites us to do the hard work of reflecting on our pedagogical approaches and sitting in the discomfort, I am reflecting on the ways in which some approaches to kindness might not resonate with all students, faculty, and staff. In her book, Denial acknowledges many of these challenges, and I am using this reflection to deepen our consideration about some places where my mind wandered to the student who might experience kindness as discomfort.

While I find ungrading to be an equitable practice when applied thoughtfully, one challenge I have with promoting practices of ungrading is how students who are less familiar with the hidden curriculum of college might grade themselves in a way that does not align with the expectations of the instructor. This could be due to a variety of reasons, including a lack

of communication with previous instructors about how to evaluate one's own work or because a student has not been taught metacognitive tools. Further, as instructors move to ungrading practices, they must be careful not to fall into hidden expectations that are not shared with the students. For example, faculty often talk to me about assigning "effort" grades—but effort can be invisible. As we are layering these challenges together, students may be evaluating themselves based on effort (because of previous instructors evaluating on effort) and thus lowering their self-assigned grade. They may be doing significant calculus to determine what is the appropriate grade, not based on their actual learning, but on whether or not their estimates will align with the expectations of their instructor. And all it takes is one misestimate for a student to experience a conflict with an instructor, resulting in a reluctance toward these alternative grading practices, and ultimately a lack of trust in a pedagogy of kindness.

Similarly, while I fully agree with the idea that we need to develop trust with our students, students who have experienced surveillance and adversarial relationships with their previous instructors<sup>5</sup> will likely not inherently trust the "kind" approaches outlined here. This will involve an additional cognitive burden as students do the calculus of whether or not to believe the instructor about various policies that directly contradict the policies of other instructors at the same institution. Further, when students are asked to share information with instructors they don't know, they may be reluctant due to previous experiences with instructors who have weaponized information against them in the past. For example, I have known students who have disclosed mental health diagnoses to instructors, and those instructors have later gone on to involve the campus mental health office when it was, in my opinion, not warranted and felt retaliatory. This puts students in unnecessary contact with the often-combative medical system and can put students' entire academic careers at risk. Faculty have also expressed frustration with students who admit that they are only taking a class because it is required for the major, or when students say that a class is not their highest priority. Those faculty have shared that their frustration negatively impacts the way they teach and how they connect with their students. Thus, students may find the idea of sharing information with their instructors to be confusing and potentially actively hostile, due to previous experiences.

Some students have culturally defined expectations about how the classroom functions, including their role in it. Upending those expectations can be puzzling and add an additional cognitive burden to students to navigate new classroom norms. For example, some students come from backgrounds in which their role in the classroom is to be a quiet, passive vessel

who receives knowledge. While we know that engaging students in co-creating their own learning can benefit student motivation and engagement, utilizing these “kind” approaches can be disorienting for students with a particular expectation of the classroom environment. Those students who expect to be led on their learning journey will be grappling with both the content of the course and also a paradigm shift in the ways in which they experience the classroom. Adjusting to this shift will utilize working memory, which adds a layer of cognitive load that may actually be less kind for students for whom cognitive load is already high.<sup>6</sup>

As Denial so clearly states, “our job is not simply to teach content, but to teach people.”<sup>7</sup> As we are acknowledging the complicated and variable circumstances of individual students’ lives, we must recognize that some students may have limited capacities for doing the deepest, biggest thinking, such as assigning themselves grades and co-creating the syllabus. This is not deficit-minded, as it’s not due to any intrinsic lack in the students. Rather, this acknowledges the contexts our students are living and learning in. Some students are experiencing circumstances (unbeknownst to their instructors) that make it difficult for them to be the expert in every one of their classes. I’m thinking about my own experience as an undergraduate student, when I had an acute emotionally distressing situation: I just needed to try to pass my chemistry class and move on, not become any kind of expert. When my life settled down, I turned back to chemistry (ultimately using multiple biochemistry techniques in my Ph.D. work). My need to scrape by was not due to some personal inability to understand chemistry, but rather a chaotic situation that I was not emotionally equipped to handle while also trying to gain expertise in an intimidating course. Importantly, waiting to take that chemistry course would have delayed my progress in my major. Had I needed to bring more of myself to that classroom, I may not have ended up in graduate school at all.

### **Invocation: Implement Pedagogical Kindness with Thoughtfulness and Care**

Just as I outlined at the beginning of this essay, trying to have Big Ideas and share them in public requires access to a lot of executive functioning, trust, courage, and energy. Some of our students are just as unlucky and chaos-prone as I am, as unbelievable as it may sound. Some of our students don’t have access to one or more of these things for reasons fully outside of their control. Sometimes, good enough is good enough. Sometimes, experiencing the “banking model” of education is what is necessary for a student to feel comfortable enough to show up to class. This is not meant to lower our expectations of our students, but to recognize that there is no one-size-

fits-all approach when human bodyminds<sup>8</sup> are at play. I think a lot about Brené Brown's assertion that "clear is kind, unclear is unkind."<sup>9</sup> Even with our best intentions, sometimes in our attempts to be kind, students may experience a lack of clarity in their roles, what is expected of them, and what they have capacity for. As we move to center kindness in our pedagogy, I implore us to consider how an approach that might feel kind to students with the most privilege may feel unkind to those who are entering spaces they have been previously excluded from, or who may be experiencing incredibly high cognitive loads at baseline.

Cate Denial has proposed a pedagogical posture that I wholeheartedly agree with: repositioning our instructor-student relationships from adversarial to collaborative. I hope that the instructors who deeply care for their students' learning and growth will incorporate her profound and necessary proposal of kindness, while also considering my caveats. When we consider the impact of our pedagogical choices on all kinds of students (especially those who have had different educational experiences than us), we increase the likelihood of better outcomes for all our students.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine J. Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2024), 2.

<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 43.

<sup>3</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> Mays Imad, Michael Reder, and Madelyn Rose, "Recasting the Agreements to Re-humanize STEM Education," *Frontiers in Education* 8 (October 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1193477>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Moro, "Against Cop Shit," *Jeffrey Moro* (blog), February 13, 2020, <https://jeffreymoro.com/blog/2020-02-13-against-cop-shit/>.

<sup>6</sup> John Sweller, "Cognitive Load during Problem Solving: Effects on Learning," *Cognitive Science* 12, no. 2 (April 1988), [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202_4).

<sup>7</sup> Denial, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Brené Brown, "Clear is Kind. Unclear is Unkind." *Brene Brown* (blog), October 15, 2018, <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2018/10/15/clear-is-kind-unclear-is-unkind/>.