

In Every Instance of Kindness: A Grateful Response to Cupido, Draucker, Kirby, and Santangelo

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When I give talks about teaching with kindness, I often close my remarks by reading part of Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Kindness" aloud. In that poem, Nye invites us to "see the size of the cloth"—the woven-together experiences of sorrow and kindness that can, if we let them, animate us and move us to embrace compassion.¹ There is plenty to grieve in higher education; plenty to which we should tend; plenty of people who need care. Those realities often make me think of Nye's poem, of the idea of kindness as an act of weaving, taking the threads of things done before, entwining them with our hopes for the future, and making something new. *A Pedagogy of Kindness* is another act of weaving, an act of entering conversations already begun and inviting others to take those conversations forward. I am grateful for each of the essays that do that work in this volume, generously and thoughtfully reflecting on the book, and pushing the discussion further.

Both Shannon Cupido and Cait Kirby tug on a crucial thread in their essays: What happens when students don't want or welcome new pedagogical practices? Cupido relates his experience teaching students at the Global Citizenship Programme at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, writing that, "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." Cupido also notes that participatory practices were "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." Kirby urges us to think clearly and seriously about circumstances that might make "kind" approaches disquieting and uncomfortable for students. When students arrive at college believing that "their role in the classroom is to be a quiet, passive vessel who receives knowledge," meeting very different practices can be deeply disorienting.

In my own teaching, the greatest share of resistance has come from students who reacted negatively to my relying on lectures early in my career. But here, I think, is the thread linking our experiences together: I needed to (and could not) explain to those students why I had chosen to lecture, other than to say it was how I had been taught, and I was tired, frightened, and at sea. My pedagogy was too uncritical at that juncture in my life; I could not have articulated what I did not know. As I grew as an instructor, and as my teaching methods changed, so did my ability to explain my teaching choices

to students, and my belief that doing so was of tremendous value. As Kirby notes, I ungrade, but I do not do so until students have had an opportunity to read about grading practices and we engage in a thorough conversation about their experiences, thoughts, hopes and fears. I use unessays, but they are preceded by a discussion about the drawbacks of relying on papers as a singular assessment tool.

Change is absolutely disquieting, which makes this kind of transparency critical. Many students arrive in our classrooms not just used to the banking model of education, but being masters at it. It can be profoundly destabilizing for students to hear that familiar teaching practices are about to be pitched out the window by an instructor who is likely new to them. I therefore take time to proactively share my approach to teaching with my students on the first day of each trimester, and try my best to remember to explain the theory behind my chosen classroom practices all term. I emphasize that if they ever find themselves confused about what we're doing and why we're doing it, they should ask me to explain. (I give them multiple ways to communicate their questions.) I believe that students should not only know the content of our many disciplines, but the rationales behind our teaching methods so that they can understand we are not motivated in our choices by capriciousness, laziness, or a lack of ability, but by genuine enthusiasm for their learning. This will not magically eradicate all resistance, but it does invite students into a conversation about the ways in which humans learn.

Kirby also raises the significant question of cognitive load for students who experience new teaching practices while weathering situations we may not know or be able to imagine. Drawing on her own undergraduate experience, she writes, "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." This is wholly fair. It is also where the relational work of teaching is of paramount importance. Learning, as far as we are able in each teaching circumstance we face, the needs, goals, and limits within which our students operate is key. This does not mean we should push past our students' boundaries, or demand disclosure in order to act. But it does mean that we understand that our class may not be of paramount importance to a student; that not every student wishes to excel in every class for a variety of sound reasons; and that simply showing up might be an incredible achievement for some. It means that we believe them. It means not extrapolating disdain from a student's choice about how much to do in, or give to, our class. It means understanding that a student's "best" is contextual,

So too are the instructor's "bests." We cannot operate on all cylinders in every class we ever teach. As I write this essay, I am coming off a week in which I genuinely struggled to find a way to teach a key U.S. Supreme Court case in my History of Marriage class. I had taught the class before but couldn't find my lesson plan. I knew the significant aspects of the case I needed to get across, but couldn't imagine how that would take up the 70-minute class period. I spent a good bit of the morning before heading to campus looking blankly at a wall over the top of my mug of tea. Inspiration

failed me; I was tired; it was almost the end of the trimester; my creativity was still in bed. And so I asked my students to teach me—first, because it is one of the highest expressions of learning to teach someone else, but second (and more truthfully) because it was the best I could do. I called it in, and sometimes, we must.

This, perhaps, is the perfect segue to L.C. Santangelo's response, focused on faculty wellness. Santangelo's essay notes that faculty wellness—and faculty capacities—are critical concepts to think about when weaving kindness into our teaching lives. While Santangelo highlights several places in *A Pedagogy of Kindness* that speak to this concern, they also write that they “would have benefitted from some more specific data about faculty well-being and mental health, whether via surveys or observational data, to better situate how faculty are actually doing.” This would, I agree, have strengthened the book further, and I am looking forward to Kevin R. McClure's *The Caring University: Reimagining the Higher Education Workplace after the Great Resignation*, and Lee Skallerup Bessette and Rebecca Pope-Ruark's edited volume, *Of Many Minds: Neurodiversity and Mental Health Among University Faculty and Staff* (both forthcoming in 2025) as two books that will greatly expand and extend this conversation. Faculty and staff wellness also occupied central importance in the Mellon-funded “Pedagogies, Communities, and Practices of Care in the Academy after COVID-19,” project on which I was P.I. in 2022 and 2023. The grant brought together thirty-six faculty and members of staff from community colleges, regional publics, liberal arts colleges, and flagship research institutions across the United States to explore trauma, disability, and pedagogical practices that would be sustainable for overworked individuals. (Much greater detail can be found at the Care in the Academy Substack, as well as at a dedicated page on the Knox College website, where we have archived our reports, surveys, and guiding materials.²) I continue to grow in my understanding of the granular detail of faculty illness, unwellness, and wellness alike.

In her wonderfully generous reading of *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, Shannon Draucker reminds us that “while the multiple, ongoing crises in higher education are never far from mind, for many teachers, our concerns on the first day of school are much more quotidian.” I hope that kindness finds us in the quotidian, and in the structural, the institutional, and the individual work that we do. Draucker also shares her own experiences with implementing kind practices as an instructor, including changing her attendance policy to be less punitive than in its original form. She writes that “this is a topic for a longer essay, [but] 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.” I very much hope Draucker writes that longer essay, as we will never cease to need more ways to practice kindness and more evidence that it works. Sometimes, as Draucker notes, kindness is about reminding ourselves that Sharpie will come off a whiteboard if you trace over the text with an erasable

marker. Sometimes it is offering a listening ear to our colleagues and students, while also listening to what our own minds and bodies have to say. And sometimes it is about colleagues taking the time in their busy schedules to engage with a book and offer wise directions for new work in the field. Every instance of kindness inspires my gratitude; every instance of kindness lays the groundwork for more.

¹ Naomi Shihab Nye, "Kindness," Poets.org, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://poets.org/poem/kindness>.

² The "after" in the grant's title was future focused; it was not a claim that the pandemic is or was over. See Knox College, "Care in the Academy," <https://www.knox.edu/care-in-the-academy>, and <https://careintheacademy.substack.com/>. Given the recent decisions by Substack's owners to platform far-right actors, we are in the process of moving our materials to Ghost at <https://care-in-the-academy.ghost.io/>.