

Empathy and compassion: towards wellbeing in learning development

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Presentation abstract

Wellbeing, empathy and compassion are increasingly discussed topics in relation to teaching, with one key question being the extent to which empathy and compassion in teaching can impact on student wellbeing as well as outcomes. Wellbeing encompasses a broad spectrum of aspects, including health – physical, mental and emotional – life balance, and happiness and fulfilment, and it is not always easy to pin-point which actions can make a difference to the students and their learning journey. This workshop aimed to address some of these questions by giving attendees key information from a study skills professional on how they can integrate a compassionate approach into their teaching, which was followed by a facilitated discussion on this topic to enable attendees to form their own compassionate teaching plans. Using Mentimeter we exchanged ideas about the definitions of empathy and compassion and how they overlap and bring together a common goal in producing learning development sessions for a diverse range of students. The interactive part of the workshop divided participants into four groups (virtual) and gave them a Jamboard link (online pin board application) where the groups were able to comment on whether compassion and empathy in the hybrid teaching and learning experience in the past academic year contributed to improved wellbeing in their students' journey. The contributions from this activity are displayed in this paper. The groups commented on wellbeing in the social experience, learning experience, academic performance, and overall improved wellbeing in the student experience. The overall aim of the session was to give participants and the facilitators a deeper knowledge of empathy and compassion and their role in student wellbeing.

Community response

In session Jamboards

Table 1. Question: How do learning and compassion in the learning developer's teaching impact the wellbeing of students in different areas of their lives?

Group 1: Wellbeing in the social experience at university (interactions with other students, lecturers, other services).	Group 2: Wellbeing in the learning experience.	Group 3: Wellbeing in the social experience outside the university (family, friends, work).	Group 4: Wellbeing and impact on academic performance.
<p>Feeling comfortable being their true self, to share and connect with those that share interests etc., but also the enriching experience of meeting others from different backgrounds etc.</p> <p>Advocate for students. Working with lecturers and programme areas to understand expectations.</p> <p>If someone's shared something with a learning developer that was difficult but got a positive experience out of it, the student may be willing to share that with other students, lecturers, etc.</p> <p>Have better communications/ dialogues between staff/students.</p>	<p>Allows students to feel confident and comfortable in participating in class discussions.</p> <p>May prompt a positive change in mindset so that learning becomes more like 'If you give me enough time, I can learn this', rather than looking for barriers to learning.</p> <p>Developing knowledge and expertise, skills, etc. that are emancipatory and fulfilling.</p> <p>Allowing students to find their identity within their institution.</p> <p>To feel empowered and have a voice, to contribute confidently to discussions.</p>	<p>Opportunity to practice social communication!</p> <p>Feeling heard and confidence building positively affects all the groups on every question here!</p> <p>Feeling more confident managing their university experience themselves.</p> <p>I've used strengths-based reflection tools before which have led to lightbulb moments for students where they realise how a difference in perspective is affecting personal relationships.</p>	<p>Increasing confidence and willingness to have a go – the Imposter syndrome feeling can be powerful for many students – allowing them to see that these feelings are normal can be so helpful to them!</p> <p>Just the power of recognising they're not alone (so compassion from fellow learners, not only us).</p> <p>The confidence to try and keep trying. Being able to work with students regularly builds trust and compassion.</p> <p>Feeling more confident about their work and understanding that learning is a process, not something that is 'finished'.</p>

<p>Therefore, better university experience for all.</p> <p>Often LD conversations turn into self-awareness conversations that give students strategies for approaching difficult conversations and managing relationships.</p> <p>It can give students more confidence to help other students, approach lecturers.</p> <p>Learning HOW to ask questions of their lecturers and tutors (e.g., not just 'What do I do/How do I do this assignment?').</p>	<p>Makes them realise their opinion matters so they are more likely to speak up and get involved</p> <p>'Poor' wellbeing - not having ability to concentrate or focus due to stress or anxiety, taking a more surface approach to just 'get by'.</p> <p>Helping them realise that nothing is ever 'perfect the first time around'.</p> <p>More positive mindset: 'if you give me enough time, I can learn this', rather than identifying barriers to learning.</p> <p>Feeling like their anxiety or lack of confidence is normal and nothing to worry about can really release students.</p>		<p>Sessions focused on academic resilience have compassion at their heart, and really help students make better use of feedback and develop a learning mindset.</p> <p>The much-needed motivation for students to get through their academic challenges; wellbeing and academic performance go hand in hand, I think.</p> <p>It's about confidence primarily, and being in a place where they can engage with self-efficacy, and overcome procrastination or low motivation.</p>
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In session word clouds activity findings

Image 1. Question: What does compassion mean in your teaching?



Image 2. Question: What does empathy mean to you in your teaching?

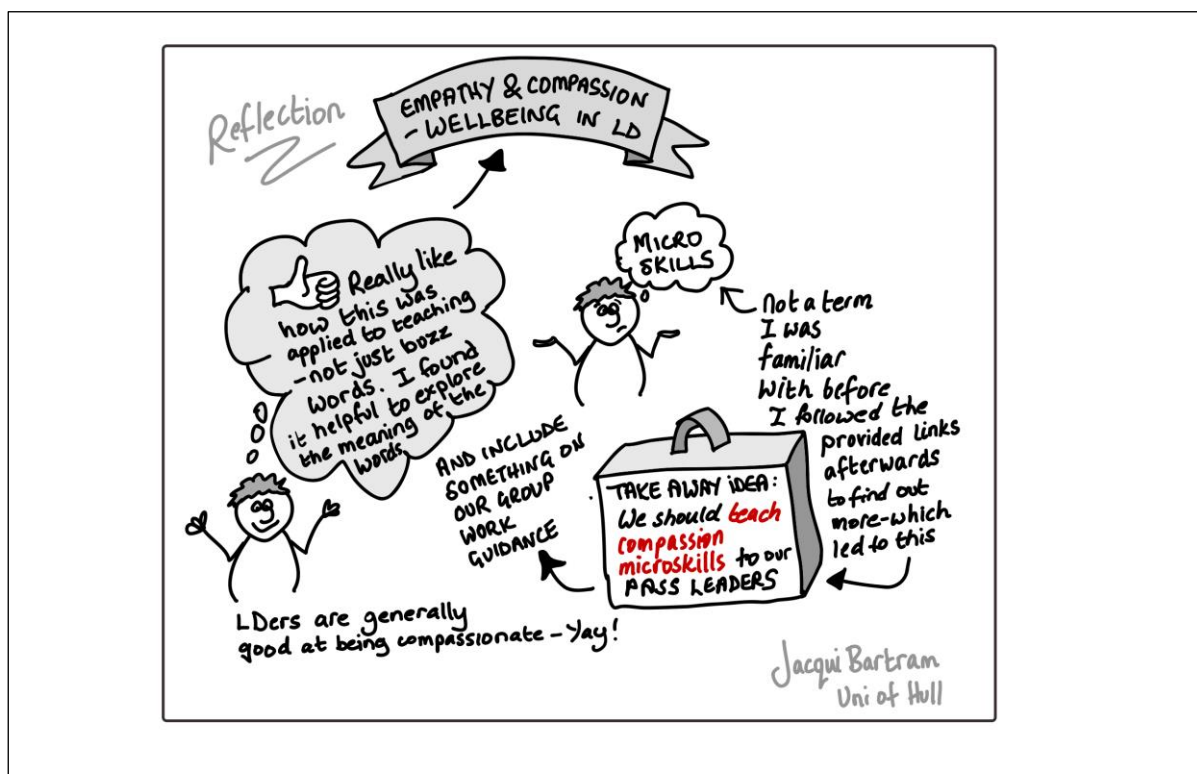


This was a well-paced, sensitively-led workshop, providing plenty of opportunities for us to unpack what we understand by, and associate with, terms like ‘empathy’, ‘compassion’ and ‘wellbeing’, as well as to discuss how learning development can be a space for more consciously and intentionally empathetic and compassionate educational practices. The Jamboard questions generated lots of insights and created a helpful resource to return to.

It would be interesting to place work like this – work which pursues, by way of the cultivation of empathy and compassion, the goal of student wellbeing – into dialogue with critiques of the discourse of wellbeing in higher education. In particular, I am thinking about the way institutional emphases on individual wellbeing (together with regular reminders that personal wellbeing is something we all should be attending to) risk deflecting attention from how HE practices reproduce the very conditions that make an explicit focus on wellbeing appear so necessary. We might also wish to question precisely to what ends our

work on wellbeing is directed, especially in the context of a sector in which notions of educational value have become so thoroughly subordinated to the imperatives of 'employability' – narrowly-defined as the individual's development of themselves as suitably disciplined, 'work-ready' human capital. Sunny Dhillon's 2018 article, 'Whose wellbeing is it anyway?', in the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, would be an excellent starting point for such a dialogue – a dialogue that could further deepen the session leaders' own reflections on what we mean when we speak of empathy and compassion in educational practice.

Image 3. Empathy and compassion – wellbeing in learning development.



Editorial comment

This workshop facilitated discussions and communicated literature relating to a growing movement within learning development to explore empathy, compassion, and wellbeing. The session was well received and planned, with the majority of the findings from the workshop showcased through the Jamboards attached. It highlights the importance of empathising with learners, as opposed to teaching, developing and assessing, as empowering to both the staff member and the student. This paper begins a conversation,

where further exploration could be undertaken by the learning development community and an interesting topic for further discussion might be whether the 'imperatives of employability' represent an issue or an opportunity for greater integration of wellbeing across employability and academic skills development (Peila-Shuster, 2016).

Authors' reflection

The authors feel that looking at empathy and compassion in the way it was presented at the AldInHE June 2022 Conference made these concepts more tangible and academically framed. Learning development sessions can give students more confidence to help other students and approach lecturers. Learning development conversations have the capacity to turn into self-awareness conversations. Working with students regularly builds trust and compassion and gives students strategies for maintaining their wellbeing. Our main insight is that empathy and compassion contribute enormously to students' wellbeing and that learning developers have a crucial role in building students' confidence, motivation, and resilience throughout their university journey.

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References

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Author details

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Emma Dempsey is Academic Engagement and Learning Developer at the University of Westminster. She started her career teaching English as a Second Language to international students in London and she enjoyed bringing together an international class of students. The importance of building rapport and making classrooms fun, informal, and secure places where each student feels comfortable to share and feels valued has always been the focus of Emma's work. Since then, she has worked in a variety of educational settings in the UK and abroad, in secondary schools, further education colleges, and universities, focussing on academic English, personal development and academic skills subjects.