

# STORIES OF HOPE

## REIMAGINING EDUCATION

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# 30. Belonging through compassion: Supporting hope through the design of a website for educational development and social justice

*Vikki Hill and Liz Bunting*

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## Abstract

This chapter advocates for a more compassionate approach to Higher Education as a pathway to achieving social justice. Central to this vision is the cultivation of belonging through relational learning communities that honour interconnectedness, shared humanity, and equitable power dynamics. Through a case study of a digital educational development platform, the authors demonstrate how compassionately designed, co-produced, dialogic, and person-centred resources can support more inclusive and humane pedagogies. They outline practical strategies for embedding an ecology of compassion within institutions and highlight the necessity of systemic, institutional commitment to challenge inequitable policies and practices in Higher Education.

**Keywords:** compassion; belonging; social justice; pedagogy; Higher Education; policy

## Introduction

We are Liz Bunting and Vikki Hill, and we have been working in collaboration as educational developers since 2019 to foster a sense of belonging in Higher Education through compassionate pedagogies, policies, and practices (Bunting & Hill, 2021). We work alongside Higher Education colleagues to co-produce teaching and learning strategies and policies to support students to feel valued, respected, included, and that they matter (Strayhorn, 2019). In our praxis, we have been increasingly aware of the need for compassion for all of us working and learning in Higher Education and recognise that our interconnected experiences contribute to a wider ecology of hope, belonging, and social justice (Braidotti, 2022).

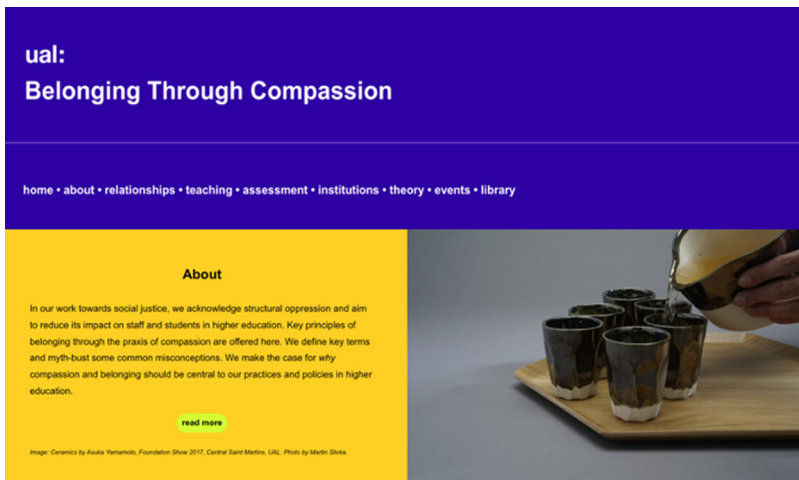


Fig. 30.1 Screen grab of website *Belonging Through Compassion*, <https://belongingthroughcompassion.myblog.arts.ac.uk/> (Ceramics by Asuka-Yamamoto, Foundation Show 2017, Central Saint Martins, UAL. Photo by Martin Slivka; reproduced with permission, CC BY-NC 4.0).

We take compassion as our guiding principle—of reducing distress and harm—(Gilbert, 2017) and have developed a website<sup>1</sup> to bring together different contributions that have helped to guide, shape and challenge our collective thinking about compassionate education for belonging (Figure 30.1). We aim to foster institutional support and a commitment from policy makers and senior leadership to effect structural and cultural change, and to create racially just environments for students

1 See *Belonging Through Compassion*, <https://belongingthroughcompassion.myblog.arts.ac.uk/>

and staff. In our case study, we present the development of our website as a catalyst for change and transformation through dialogic, polyvocal, and arts-based approaches.

## Context of hope

In Autumn 2021, we secured funding from a University of the Arts London (UAL) seed-fund that focused on educational enhancement for social justice. Our research project aimed to meet several institutional enhancement goals. It drew upon and accelerated our previous academic enhancement work on fostering belonging through compassionate pedagogies (Hill, Bunting, & Arboine, 2020), responding to evidence of student un-belonging from a range of sources across UAL. Comments and experiences captured across a range of spaces—NSS/USS open comments, @UALTruths, Decolonising The Arts Curriculum Zine (Jethnani et al., 2018; Jethnani et al., 2020), and UAL Student Voices—all spoke to student feelings of isolation, loneliness, not “fitting in”, being an outsider, and being stereotyped. The project furthermore supported UAL’s institutional commitment to advancing the goals outlined in its anti-racist plan (UAL, 2021), while enhancing student wellbeing by developing more compassionate learning cultures. The project is informed by strong evidence of the role of belonging in student success (Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2017) and the increasing use of the concept in addressing ethnicity awarding differentials that persist in Higher Education between white students and students of colour (NUS/UUK, 2019; UUK 2022). In our educational development work with staff and students, we witnessed a gap between the rhetoric of belonging and institutional realities (Thomas, 2019). This prompted further thinking about how we conceive of belonging through compassion within the whole institution.

Our ambition was to create an open-access digital resource that could be an interactive space to host a range of multi-media resources. We aimed to position race equity work as everyone’s responsibility—academics and senior leaders—coming together as a collective to effect structural and cultural change. Our vision was to create racially just environments for students and staff by creating and curating content in collaboration with colleagues. Influenced by Mays Imad



(2021), we sought to impart hope and cultivate hopefulness for a more compassionate Higher Education sector as a political act against injustice. Not naive hope (Freire, 1994) but hope in the face of struggles amid the backdrop of increasingly challenging teaching environments and student circumstances. As Simone de Beauvoir writes (cited by Lorde 1988, p. 115), “It is in the recognition of the genuine conditions of our lives that we gain the strength to act and our motivation for change”.

### Imagining compassionate futures in higher education

The importance of compassion as a relational pedagogy of care in teaching and learning responds to an urgent demand for compassionate policies and practices (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017; Noddings, 2005; Gilbert, 2017; Waddington, 2021). To help us imagine what compassionate education might look and feel like, here we offer our perspectives on compassion and how it connects to creating a sense of belonging for students and staff. Compassion has been defined in various ways across many disciplines from psychology and organisational studies to philosophy (Gilbert, 2017; Worline & Dutton, 2017; Nussbaum, 1996) and there is an agreement that it is “the noticing of social or physical distress to others and the commitment to reduce or prevent that distress” (Gilbert, 2017, p. 189). Compassion is a relational process; an action rather than an expression of related emotions such as kindness, pity, or empathy. Hooria Jazaieri (2018, p. 24) presents compassion as a complex entanglement of “an affective state, an intention and motivation”, which can contribute to collaborative and cooperative behaviours.

Compassion recognises the trauma that frames educational experiences of staff and students (Thompson & Carello, 2021) (noticing), alleviates its effects (enacting), and becomes active in the prevention of harm (reducing). Preventing harm involves challenging conversations and disrupting the status quo. It requires an ongoing process of challenging normative power structures and inequitable systems that can be oppressive and damaging. We recognise that no singular action will accomplish this change, and our understanding of needs will be continuously evolving. We understand compassion to be both tender and fierce (Neff, 2021a). To achieve social justice we need

both aspects. As Kristin Neff states, “as we advocate for change, it’s essential that fierceness and tenderness be balanced. If we’re too tender without taking enough fierce action, we may become complacent. But if our fierceness is not tempered with tenderness, we may become hostile and aggressive, undermining compassion” (Neff, 2021b, para. 4).

Compassion needs to be embedded within the ecology of the institution to enable compassionate practices to flourish. Compassion cannot exist in a vacuum; it is a collective act and cyclic in nature. It must be received by and enacted upon by everyone within our educational communities (Hill et al., 2023). At the heart of compassionate pedagogies, policies and practices that nurture belonging is building loving relationships in our learning communities (Gravett & Winstone, 2020; Bunting et al., 2024). This calls for approaches that make space for our inter-connectedness, recognise our shared humanity, and redistribute power to enable everyone to be fully human and welcome our authentic selves (Othering & Belonging Institute, 2019).

## Shaping our site to empower hope

As we began our journey to create a site, we held the principle of collaboration as central to its development. To learn together with and from our colleagues as a community, we employed collaborative strategies to promote the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, living and breathing our ethos of belonging. This included holding semi-structured interviews with nine colleagues across UAL with specialisms in educational development, digital learning, and multimedia resources, to garner learnings from their experiences (Figure 30.2). We would like to thank our colleagues for generously sharing their time and expertise with us, and without whom this work would have taken a very different direction: Dr Natasha Bonnelame, Dr Neil Currant, Katharine Dwyer, Jorge Freire, Gemma Riggs, Chris Rowell, Dr Duna Sabri, Dr Emily Salines, and Santanu Vasant.

Our conversations and practice sharing helped us to generate case studies that led to the development of core principles and values that permeated the design of our site. These were: dialogic and polyvocal, person-centred, and compassionately designed.

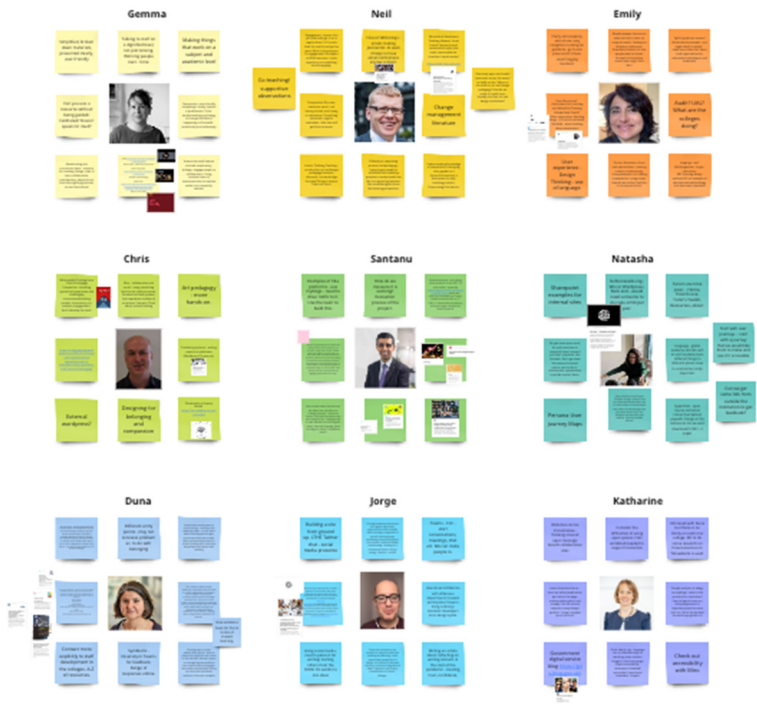


Fig. 30.2 Screen grab of interview notes on collaborative Miro board, <https://miro.com/> (image by author, Vikki Hill, CC BY-NC 4.0).

### Dialogic and polyvocal

We wanted to provide a diversity of voices as a critical pedagogic approach to decentre authority (Stommel, 2014) and support staff in examining and challenging dominant pedagogical beliefs and practices. This polyvocality is designed to prompt individual reflection about how belonging relates to their contexts, identify potential barriers and emerging issues, and guide ideas for changes to both individual and collective practices. In a study for her doctoral research, Vikki had demonstrated that the use of podcasts in an academic development context supported teaching staff to develop and apply compassionate pedagogies (Hill, 2022). We found that “podcasts provide a polyvocal dialogue, which continues beyond the podcast itself as listeners explore



the relationships and construct their own meaning for their teaching and learning practice” (Bunting & Hill 2021, p. 146). This led us to draw upon a variety of resources from a broad range of authors offering differing perspectives.

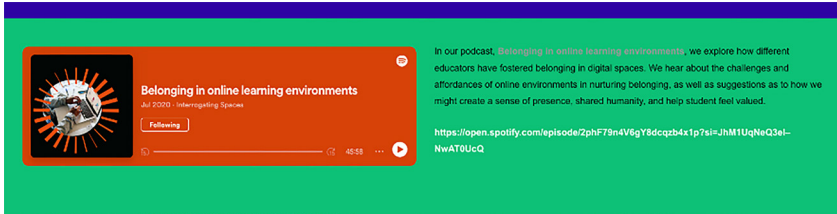


Fig. 30.3 Screen grab of podcast, “Belonging in Online Learning Environments”, *Interrogating Spaces* (31 July 2020), <https://interrogatingspaces.buzzsprout.com/683798/episodes/4795271-belonging-in-online-learning-environments>

## Person-centred

Supporting hope through educational development involves empowering personal agency and envisioning possibilities (McGowan & Felten, 2021). We aimed to maintain a balance between theoretical and practical resources to consider the needs of individuals who were accessing the site. We aimed for a holistic approach to create cultures of compassion, to empower mutual responsibility and to promote reflection at different levels of the institution, be that leadership teams, professional services or academics. Different roles might require different resources. For example, compassion might mean empowering students to have more choice and voice in their learning for an academic colleague, but for leadership colleagues, it may mean reducing assessment load or writing a compassionate policy. We wanted to invite individuals to enact compassion in a way that was authentic to them, to generate a diversity of approaches that offered a richness in attending to different needs. We supported this by showcasing compassionate pedagogies that colleagues were adopting both within and beyond the institution, drawing upon open-source publications and resources (Figure 30.4).

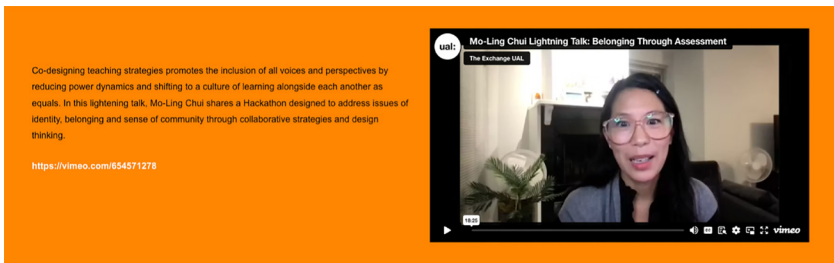


Fig. 30.4 Screen grab of Teaching page, *Belonging Through Compassion*, <https://belongingthroughcompassion.myblog.arts.ac.uk/teaching/>

## Compassionately designed

The tone and design of the text and image were important as they signal a welcoming digital space that creates a sense of belonging. We intentionally avoided formal academic language, preferring our own authentic, conversational voices to offer a sense of presence and connection.

Modelling compassionate approaches requires being affirmative of our own limits and boundaries of what we can do (Braidotti, 2022). We emphasise that nurturing belonging is not about doing more, but rather about doing things *differently*. The contributions on the site speak to making “small social justice transformations” (Tate, 2019) anchored in *how* we design learning experiences and environments. We encourage the practice of radical self-compassion and invite colleagues to respect what they need when using the resource. As educational developers, we are mindful of how our academic colleagues are experiencing workload time pressures and emotional and physical exhaustion as we navigate an increasingly complex and anxious world. We endeavoured to provide bite-sized content and designed the site navigation to be intuitive and easily accessible to reduce cognitive load (Sweller, 2011).

## Designing ecologies of hope and compassion

We designed the site so that the content supported holistic cultures of compassion across institutions. We start with an about page where we define key principles of belonging through the praxis of compassion and

myth-bust some common misconceptions. As belonging is social and relational, relationality connects all the sections of the site. We position relationships as a place to unfold transformative paths by exploring the principles of trust, care, respect, and self-compassion.

The pages on teaching, assessment, and institutions offer a space for deeper reflection on overlapping practices across domains and disciplines to trace connections and construct new knowledges of compassion. Within the teaching page, we embed compassionate pedagogies into mainstream academic activity and curriculum design by curating examples from students and colleagues that offer practical guidance. As assessment is a powerful driver to create cultures of belonging within learning and teaching, we propose compassionate assessment as a way to address issues of social justice and consider the impact of assessment policies and practices in reducing harm. We offer guidance and consider how wider institutional policies, processes and systems can bring about positive change and how institutional leaders can create cultures of belonging and compassion by developing the infrastructure to nurture it. We recognise that colleagues have different needs and interests, so we interconnect theoretical perspectives across disciplines and boundaries and explore how compassionate pedagogies, Indigenous knowledges, trauma-informed practice, posthumanism, and pedagogies of care inform belonging.

## Developing a more joyful and hopeful education

The site was launched in January 2023 and we have been using the platform in our respective roles as educational developers to start conversations both within our institutions and externally across the educational sector.

We use the resource in a variety of ways. We have found that when we share it in workshops and listening events we recommend or offer an introduction about a particular page (i.e., Relationships, Teaching, or Assessment). This encourages participants to find resources helpful to their own educational context and the challenges they and their colleagues are facing. For a more focused session, we identify a specific podcast, such as *Compassionate Feedback* and accompanying prompt

question sheet,<sup>2</sup> and the whole session is designed around this. We create space for practice sharing—whether this is individual use of a platform like Padlet, or through discussion with a team, school, or division. By familiarising colleagues with the website, they can access it for drop-ins when needed or explore the themes in more depth when time allows. The website is used for academic enhancement by individuals, teams and leadership to add concrete and practical activities to action plans, assessment design and curriculum planning.

We have found it nourishing to be able to share and gather feedback from colleagues so that we can understand how our work can have purpose. At UAL, the work on the site “has ignited a critical discourse around the purpose and design of assessment that has had a direct impact in advancing inclusive fair assessment” (Head of Assessment and Quality at UAL, project feedback). Through re-thinking normative practices and assumptions, colleagues have designed policies and guidance to nurture safety for students and staff. Externally, we have run workshops and Teaching and Learning Away Days and presented at conferences to urgently respond to times of crisis.

We return to our utopian vision of socially just, compassionate education. Whilst a future of compassionate Higher Education is slow and may never be fully achievable, we also do not believe that it is binary or requires perfection. We draw on Rosi Braidotti’s (2019, p. 136) definitions of affirmative ethics as the “pursuit of affirmative values and relations” as we collaboratively enact compassion and hope of transformation. We are reminded by Eduardo Galeano that the purpose of utopia is to keep on walking.

### Steps toward hope

- Advocate for a compassionate Higher Education system to create belonging and achieve social justice.
- Emphasise the importance of an institutional approach to support initiatives that help embed ecologies of compassion and foster equitable pedagogies, policies, and practices.

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2 See “Assessment: Compassionate feedback prompts”, *Belonging through Compassion*, <https://belongingthroughcompassion.myblog.arts.ac.uk/assessment/>

- Harness relational pedagogy and actively foster relationships in learning communities to develop inter-connectedness, recognise shared humanity, and redistribute power.
- Support staff development with the co-production of person-centred, dialogic, and polyvocal resources that embody compassionate design.

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