

Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures



Edited by
Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin



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20. One-one coco full basket — on the value of critical pedagogy of caring for learning and teaching in higher education

Carol Hordatt Gentles

Earlier this year I received a message from Pamela,¹ one of my students who had just completed her final course for her masters degree. She wrote:

Good morning, Doc

Thanks for being an awesome lecturer. I really appreciate the feedback and guidance. I think you are the best lecturer I had in my master's programme. I really like your teaching style and by and large your temperament. Your style has reframed my approach to teaching and learning. You treated us like humans. HONESTLY, you have impacted me greatly. Please continue to be that awesome lecturer. Your surname speaks a volume, GENTLE!!!! (Pamela, personal communication, May, 23 2022)

This message was a highlight in my career because Pamela said I had treated students "like humans". It validated my life's work as an educator/teacher educator who has sought to be an advocate for humanising the experience of education. It was such a touching assertion of her own humanity because it demonstrated her confidence to express her opinions about me as her teacher. I was thrilled that she valued my style of teaching enough to consider it as a model for her own practice. Pamela's unsolicited affirmation strengthened my belief

1 The name Pamela and all other names used are pseudonyms. All students have given me permission to share sentiments offered in private.

that there is value in practising pedagogy that is both critical and caring. It also built my own confidence as a teacher and academic to continue my work of theorising about the role of a critical pedagogy of caring in Jamaican higher education.

My premise that it is essential to consider critical, caring pedagogy as a means of improving teaching and learning in Jamaican higher education springs from my concern about the dominance of a neoliberal ideology in Jamaica and the world. I am unhappy with the dominant paradigms of higher education pedagogy (as explored throughout this book), that align with “the status quo discourse” and a culture of performativity. Such dominant discourse sees the work of teaching as “ahistorical and apolitical”, “value-neutral” and identifies competencies through “process-product empirical research” (Marsh & Castner, 2017, p. 870).

There are many who would argue that higher education in Jamaica has historically positioned itself to support societal transformation from our colonial past. This is true, as is evident in its rich tradition of postcolonial research, and its commitment to making tertiary education accessible to all. Higher education at my institution has contributed much to the development of Jamaica and the Caribbean region in its production of stalwart Caribbean scholars (Chevannes, 2018; Miller, 2003; Nettleford, 2000; Shepherd & Hemmings, 2022) whose works have highlighted, questioned, and vociferously critiqued the lingering legacy of slavery and colonial hegemony. However, the language of current policy statements and strategic plans suggests the privileging of a business model approach focusing on accountability. For example, in its most recent strategic plan, students and faculty are described as “the main buyers of services”, and faculty are seen as “the main suppliers of [its]core business offerings — Teaching, Learning and Research” (University of the West Indies [UWI], 2017, p. 6).

The same document describes using a “Porterian analysis (Five forces model of industry competition)” lens to guide the development of its mission and the way in which it rationalises this. To this end, it speaks to the urgency of “academic and entrepreneurial empowerment through teaching and learning and rekindling the agenda of applied research and professional training [which] are critical to building the region’s resilience and promoting the praxis of relentlessly pursuing sustainable development” (UWI, 2017, p. 3). The document explains that evidence

for this urgency is explained by “a clear reading of the regional context which shows the slow and sluggish economic recovery from the global financial recession” (UWI, 2017, p. 1).

As an educator who is passionately committed to an alternate critical discourse, this rhetoric seems contradictory to what I believe the ultimate purpose of higher education should be. Ideally, I see this purpose as a moral, ethical endeavour informed by a humanistic view of education. This does not reject the notion that economic development is crucial for improving the standard of living for humanity. However, as we look to the future, an alternate critical perspective speaks to the significance of reconceptualising how we understand development. This has become particularly urgent with the impact of climate change and the need for all of us to accept our responsibility to work for sustainability of the planet and the life it supports.

My views align with a growing discourse on re-establishing the commitment of universities to be socially responsible. Drawing on a variety of perspectives, there is an emerging consensus that universities have dual responsibilities at both global and local levels (Ali et al., 2021; GUNi, 2017; Hall & Tandon, 2021). They must figure out how to address “both the local demands of society based on the race for global competitiveness and the local and global demands to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable society” (GUNi, 2017, p. 37). There is a need for them to ensure that “students... fully develop their own abilities with a sense of social responsibility, educating them to become critical participants in a democratic society and promoters of changes that will foster equity and justice” (Coelho & Menezes, 2021, p. 2).

My way of contributing to this movement has been to adopt a Freirean (1970) humanistic perspective that aims to teach students to confront how schooling and society have objectified them. Freire challenges us as educators to teach our students to assert their humanity so they can become the *Subject* rather than the *Object* of their experiences, realities, and their future. To do this, I have, through my research and teaching (Gentles, 2018), advocated that as teacher educators and academic faculty, we should be committed to teaching with a critical and moral purpose that values and honours the humanity of teachers and students. I have focused my attention on trying to disrupt the technical rationality that erodes our capacity and confidence for professional autonomy. This

is an ideology in which the purpose of teacher education is seen to be, according to Liston and Zeichner (1987):

providing prospective teachers with that which will give them technical mastery of the teaching-learning environment... Prospective teachers are viewed primarily as passive recipients of teaching knowledge and skills and play little part in determining the substance and direction of their preparation for teaching and pedagogical practices. (pp. 26–27)

In this chapter, I share my experiences and insights gained over the course of my teaching career as an advocate for a different way of teaching. I consider what I have learned as instructive — possibilities for mainstreaming critical, caring pedagogy to improve the teaching and learning future of Jamaican higher education.

Methodology

As I begin, I declare that my aim is neither to moralise nor to prescribe. Rather, as I muse about the possibilities for changing the dominant pedagogy in my own environment, I simply wish to share and deconstruct my experiences as a teacher educator within the context of my beliefs and views about the role and purpose of university teaching and education. I am invoking the notion of “intimate scholarship” described by Hamilton and Pinnegar (2014) as:

a subjective, relational, and up-close look [that can] expose those aspects of our lives. Intimate scholarship takes up ontological stance where recognition of the individual/collective relation has value, uncovers embodied knowing through autobiography and action, and explores the coming-to-know process in dialogue. (p. 153)

This is a form of educational inquiry that values the particular, vulnerability, and openness to interpretation. It allows for construction of knowledge about the practice of teaching and teacher education in ways that go against the grain of positivistic, empirical research (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015). What I share, therefore, are what I call learning moments in my eighteen-year journey as a teacher educator in a leading university in Jamaica. These are incidents and experiences I have documented in journal entries and notes to myself. Over the years, I have reflected and interrogated these to try and make sense of them, and to figure out what

I could have done differently. Some of these were watershed moments. Others were less momentous, yet instructive. I have been privileged to share my experiences with teaching colleagues and peers who have been willing to listen to my ruminations and whose feedback has been invaluable to the process of problematising my own insights into my practice. I have also benefited from feedback from my students over the years. Their responses to my teaching have been invaluable in motivating me to think deeply about my evolving identity as a teacher educator.

By documenting what I have learned from such critical interrogation, I have been using a self-study approach (LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran, 2004). Ritter (2016) suggests that self-study is acceptable as research practice because it is not a “prescriptive methodology” (p. 37). He explains that “rather than simply uncovering answers to research questions, self-study facilitates nuanced forms of learning that can be in relationship to others, with and through critical friends, or by seeing practice from the students’ perspective.” My reflections below highlight learning moments that have shaped my journey of advocacy for a critical, caring pedagogy in higher education. They show how my own understanding of a critical pedagogy of care has evolved. I discuss how these stories have been instructive for constructing a critically conscious understanding of the possibilities for using this approach in Jamaican higher education.

Learning moments

Yes — but how will you make a real difference?

The genesis of my advocacy began in the last five minutes of the oral defence of my doctoral thesis, when one of the examiners asked me how I planned to use what I had learned from my doctoral work. I was really taken aback. Wasn’t it obvious? I had just finished sharing the results of six years of research on the pedagogical culture of a Jamaican teachers’ college. This was the culmination of an intense life-changing journey through the theoretical discourse of critical pedagogy which I had used as a lens to examine teaching and learning in a teacher education institution. I had explained how important it was to disrupt the status quo of tradition and authoritarianism. I believed this could be accomplished by simply spreading the word about critical pedagogy. However, here

was one of my examiners — a seasoned teacher educator and teacher education scholar saying: *“I hear you and like what you are saying, but how exactly will simply saying the words really change the way things are?”* This was the voice of reality intruding into the ideal world I had created in my mind. I realised that telling would not be enough. I would have to advocate through action. So, I responded: *“I really do believe I can promote the idea of critical pedagogy by encouraging critical consciousness of what is wrong with our education system. But I will also practise critical pedagogy by developing what Joan Wink (1996) calls a caring heart and a critical eye.”*

With this declaration I made a commitment to what has defined my work as a teacher educator and academic — trying to construct a pedagogy that is critical and at the same time caring. I saw this as a way to contest traditional pedagogy by sharing and modelling a more humanistic type of teaching. But this came at a cost. I had been a high school teacher for many years prior to working in higher education. During this period, I had always tried to be a caring teacher by offering pastoral care: *“supporting the well-being of students”* (Mariskind, 2014, p. 309). I *“cared about”* and *“cared for”* (O’Connor, 2008) my students by trying to meet their emotional, developmental, and cognitive learning needs with patience, empathy, love and nurturing.

I took this pastoral approach to my new job in a university context because I saw it as the core of quality teaching. My doctoral engagement with the theoretical discourse of critical pedagogy had given me insights, and a new language and tools for strengthening this approach. So, as I began working with my higher education students, I added these ways of teaching and relating that explicitly showed and modelled respect. I devised strategies to help my students build a voice and a sense of self by making sure they always felt included, and develop the confidence and courage to participate equitably in class activities. No one was silenced. Everyone’s ideas were welcomed and encouraged. No thought or query went unanswered or was judged. I also showed respect by making sure I was always fully prepared to teach by organising my content ahead of time and being punctual.

It was also important to teach my students to become critically conscious. I designed strategies to stimulate them intellectually by sharing my convictions about the significance of becoming critically conscious of the historical, social, political, and economic contexts of their daily lives as teachers and as graduate students. To do this

in an engaging way, I integrated explanations of ideas and concepts with individual and group activities designed to challenge their thinking. I posed questions that encouraged them to deconstruct their personal and professional experiences and to recognise social injustice, oppression, marginalisation, silencing, and exclusion. I facilitated active thinking that strengthened their capacity to problematise issues. This included facilitating learning experiences designed to be stimulating and meaningful. We role played, we debated, we made charts, we envisioned ideal educational institutions. I assigned written coursework that required critical reflection on educational issues and on their own learning experiences.

It was plenty of work, but I believed it was worth the effort. My commitment to being a caring teacher reflected a Freirean view of good teaching as being caring enough to try to teach well in contextually relevant ways, with daring, expertise, and criticality (Anderson et al., 2019). Freire (2005) had argued that “educating involves a passion to know that involves us in a loving search for knowledge” (p. 7). By emphasising caring, I was adhering to the views of Noddings (2002; 2005) who believed that the “main aim of education should be a moral one, that of nurturing the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable persons” (Soltis, 2005, p. ix). Noddings proposed that this can be accomplished with “a curriculum organised around centers of care: care for oneself; for intimate others as well as strangers and distant others; for animals, plants, the earth; and for human instruments and ideas” (Soltis, 2005, p. ix). Another care theorist, Gilligan (1982) explained an “ethic of caring” as a “consciousness of the dynamics of human relationships... [which] becomes central to moral understanding joining the heart and eye in an ethic that ties the activity of thought to the activity of care” (p. 148). Thus, an ethic or ideology of caring supports the moral purpose of teaching and drives thinking into action. Caring becomes the “basis for thoughtful educational and moral decision making, and it requires action” (Rogers & Webb, 1991, p. 174).

Wise up or you will never get ahead!

I soon realised that what I was doing was not necessarily expected of me. I was advised by some colleagues to resist going overboard. They explained that at this level I was working with adults who were expected

to take responsibility for their own learning. They told me I was “spoon-feeding” my students and creating too much work for myself. My head of department took me aside and pointed out the prospective “error of my ways”. She explained my primary task was to publish research papers. I was expected to fulfil my teaching obligations and earn decent course evaluation scores because “in this system, little reward was given for teaching.” She suggested I should wise up. This was food for thought.

In thinking this through, I realised that in this higher education context my caring work and pedagogy — a critical pedagogy of caring, was actually a form of subversion. What I was doing was caring-as-activism (McKamey, 2011). I was, as hooks (1994) characterised it, acting as “enlightened witness” for my students, “challenging power-as-domination and offering alternative models of interaction” (Mariskind, 2014, p. 309). However, my perspective and advocacy did not fit neatly into what was then the norm in higher education — an emphasis on requiring autonomous, self-directed learning from adult learners (Merriam et al., 2007). Caring was valued but was not regarded as a significant part of the duties of faculty (Goode et al., 2020). As Pranjic (2021) argues: “In the academic world, there is a common understanding that nurture is not the job of the university and that it is a matter of the family, primary and secondary school, while colleges [and universities] should deal exclusively with education” (p. 152). In higher education it was logical reasoning, objectivity, and empiricism that were regarded as most valuable. Caring was not discouraged but it was less highly regarded.

The editor is rejecting your submission. You must have empirical evidence to inform your conclusions.

To do my job effectively, I had to figure out how to continue with my caring, critical activism, while also learning to play the game of publishing as expected by my university. One strategy has been to write reflective, conceptual papers that try to refine and defend my ideology and pedagogy to be more receptive in academic communities. This has not always been easy. In a positivistic higher education culture, reflective papers are often rejected because they are not based on statistical data. The devastating words I quote above were sent to me by the editor of a

campus journal. She was rejecting a paper I had submitted in answer to a call for papers about the experiences of teaching at my university during the COVID-19 pandemic. I had written a critical interrogation of what it was like to try to enact critical, caring pedagogy while transitioning to online delivery. I had used critical theory to frame my experiences and ideas but included no numerical data to support the challenges I had described. Thankfully, for me, the same paper was accepted and published by another journal abroad. So, my efforts were not wasted.

I had a similar experience fourteen years earlier when I submitted a paper that described and interrogated the strategies I was developing to build student voice in a qualitative research methods course. At the time, I was trying to figure out how to create egalitarian, safe, learning spaces in a course with fifty-six students. Many were older students returning to higher education after teaching for many years. They had qualified as teachers in colleges which were very lecturer-centred and traditional. Students raised their hands when they wanted to speak. The lecturer decided if, when, and for how long the chosen student would speak. Correct answers were rewarded, incorrect answers were not. Discussion, dissent, dialogue were not encouraged. Thus, students came to my course with eroded confidence and silenced voices. They found it very difficult to speak freely. What they needed were opportunities to speak openly, with validation from me and their peers, so they could unearth their voices and gain confidence to participate in critical dialogue and discussion.

However, it was difficult to give each student the time they needed to do this in such a large group. I encouraged them to send me emails where they could say anything they wanted. I responded to each email as sensitively as I could. It turned out to be a wonderful experience where my students taught me so much. For example, I learned that not everyone liked this approach. They had come expecting to listen to me talk, take notes, study, memorise and regurgitate for a grade. As one student complained, "the dialogic stuff is too much work, I just want to get my 'A' and move on." I also learned that I was not as egalitarian as I thought when a female student wrote: "do you realise you address the men in the class as Mr, but you call us (women) by our first names??!!!" On the other hand, students reassured me that my critical pedagogy was working. Yet another shared: "At first, I was afraid to say anything.

I did not know anything about qualitative research, so I did not want to seem ignorant, but now I feel more comfortable.” One more said: “I am beginning to feel a sense of community in the class. I feel more comfortable about talking out.” At the end of the semester, we had a class party. I was deeply touched when the whole class got together to sing me a tribute and gave me a gift.

My aim in writing about this experience had been to share strategies for overcoming resistance to teaching in non-traditional ways. I wanted to celebrate how rewarding it was to help students construct their own knowledge and to “move out of their comfort zones into dangerous new places of critical thinking and reflection” (Gentles, 2007, p. 78). But the reviewers were concerned that I had no empirical data, no statistics or outcomes that were measurable. The validity of the paper was questioned. Thankfully, the editor decided to “take a chance” and published the paper despite the strong reservations of the reviewer. These experiences made me feel very sad. I felt my voice and the voices of my students had been silenced by my own university. They taught me about the tyranny of positivism in HE. It poses a challenge to faculty and students who want to write differently. It questions the integrity of their voice and the “findings” from their introspection and deep reflection. The system makes it more difficult for those who see the world of HE differently to express their views. Instead, writing that speaks to activism and alternate discourses must find different spaces in which to publish. Given that the work of publishing is already a difficult process, this marginalisation makes it even harder.

We have noticed a high percentage of A’s on your grade sheet.
Please justify in writing.

I have received this request from the office of graduate studies many times during my career, because more than 80% of my students had scored an “A”. To many educators this is a reasonable request that conforms to the notion that student scores should align to the Bell Curve. For me, this expectation is problematic. It goes against the grain of how I see myself working with my students. My students’ high performance is facilitated by the way I structure my courses. I provide a lot of feedback, guidance, and support to ensure they can all earn an

"A". I schedule special meetings with students who are not doing well on course assignments to teach them what they need to do to improve on previous assignments. In courses for doctoral students, I ask them to collaborate with me to design rubrics for assessing their papers. Students also benefit from receiving peer reviews, so they experience the value of collaboration and caring for each other. My critical, caring pedagogy aims to go the extra mile to ensure most, if not all succeed. I also require plenty of oral and written critical reflection from my students which become part of assessment for my courses. For example, in a course on teacher leadership, masters students are asked to design, implement, and report on a project that makes a change in their own students' lives. They work on this as a group and then submit individual reports.

This approach speaks to seeing the purpose of assessment differently from how it is understood in traditional, teacher-centred spaces. I am more interested in evaluating how much my graduate students have understood the work of becoming critically reflective. I consider the degree to which they have developed their voice and how strong it becomes. I want to see and hear their growing critical consciousness of the world of education. I believe this to be significant criteria for determining what and how they have learned in my courses. As Down and Ferguson (2022) suggest:

we need... to be mindful of the larger purpose of assessment — that of clarifying the readiness of individuals to acknowledge self as part of the community of life... [it must be] part of teaching and learning that offers students a vision of a transformed life and world. (p. 85)

Your caring has made a difference.

A final learning moment I wish to share is one of affirmation. Recently, I was invited to a get-together by the newest graduates of my Masters in Teacher Education and Teacher Development programme. To my surprise, it was a party in my honour. Each of them gave a tribute which was touching and reassuring. However, there was one tribute from an articulate and excellent student that stood out. He said that while he appreciated my pedagogy and what he had learned about teaching, it was my caring that had inspired him. He explained that my caring had supported him and his fellow students through the programme.

Without this, many of them would not have found the motivation to continue the programme. Hearing this and witnessing his words, his voice, his confidence and sincerity was humbling. It reaffirmed there is value in advocating for incorporating critical, caring pedagogy into higher education in Jamaica.

Discussion

The picture that emerges from my reflections suggests it is possible to carve out a space for a critical, caring pedagogy within traditional higher education institutions. Over the years, my way of doing things has been enthusiastically accepted by students and tolerated within my institution because my activism occupies a small space that is not too dangerous. But the possibilities for mainstreaming such an approach seem slim. The reality is that teaching against the grain is hard work. Working from a space of critical, caring activism is difficult to do. Possibilities for educators to commit to advocacy for a critical, caring pedagogy are hindered by several realities.

First, while being a caring teacher educator is considered desirable, expressions of critical ideas based on being caring, or grounded in experiences of caring work, are less likely to gain the attention of university leaders and policy makers. One reason for this is that conceptualisations of caring in universities are often gendered and traditionally linked to women and femininity (Mariskind, 2014). Thus, academics who focus on caring for students are respected for their maternalism, and “are assumed to be nurturing, caring, emotional, irrational, empathetic and passive” (O’Neill, 2005). Those whose teaching is more masculine in orientation are seen as “independent, ambitious, competitive, objective, rational, and have good leadership and decision-making skills” (O’Neill, 2005). These masculine qualities align better with the business model approach and are thus more valued and respected. Faculty who espouse these qualities are seen to be more worthy of promotion to senior positions with influence and higher remuneration. Their opinions are more likely to be valued.

The reality is that as universities become more challenged by rising costs, economic recessions, competition for student enrolment, staffing shortages, and employee demands for decent remuneration,

faculty may find themselves focusing more on economic survival than prioritising the social and ideological learning needs of their students. Staff redundancies in some universities and the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the workload of many faculty members, making it even harder to manage the job of teaching and conducting research. This minimises possibilities for faculty to take on a commitment to a critical, caring pedagogy that demands even more time and energy, even though they may agree with the urgency for contesting the status quo.

Ironically, a new trend of demanding that faculty engage in “care labour” is adding to that workload (Goode et al., 2020, p. 50). This requires them to “operate as a nexus of social and emotional support resources within the institutional contexts” of “best practices in serving students” as part of efforts to increase student retention and persistence of the most vulnerable students. Researchers are investigating the components of this care labour and theorising how to operationalise them so they can be taught to faculty (Mariskind, 2014; Walker-Gleaves, 2019). This development is disturbing. While it may lead to higher education environments where caring is part of the job description of faculty, the mindset that motivates “care labour” is not the same as teaching in critically caring ways. The concept of “care labour” serves the purposes of a business model and is informed by concerns for student/client satisfaction. This is different from caring work that is linked to activism aimed at repositioning higher education in a humanistic way.

The work of improving teaching and learning at my university by infusing a critical, caring pedagogy has been possible, but only on a small scale. It requires courage, confidence, and energy to sustain commitment to a critical, caring pedagogy, especially in contexts where the business model of higher education places high value on operationalising and standardising performance outcomes. As I have suggested, a critical, caring educator has to be willing to resist the system in every sphere of one’s practice — planning, teaching, assessing, relationships with students. Critical, caring pedagogy is about encouraging student agency and changing mindsets. This can be difficult to evaluate and score objectively. When students feel comfortable and give generous feedback that validates your work, it is easy to believe that you have accomplished what you set out to do. But when a student writes a paper that shows they are speaking their minds and voicing what they really

think, how do you score, in a standardised way, the awakening of self and critical consciousness? Teaching and assessing against the grain can be physically and emotionally exhausting. In today's high paced, frenetic systems of higher education, it is often difficult for educators to find the energy and the will to do things differently. This can diminish possibilities for mainstreaming critical, caring pedagogy into higher education.

Yet even as I consider the challenges of doing so, my vision remains steadfast — for a caring and critical mindset and pedagogy to be infused and mainstreamed into institutional cultures across Jamaican higher education. This means that the ideology underpinning a caring and critical pedagogy would become the core of university policies. This would be realised by a complete “disruption and reorientation of existing (curriculum, pedagogical and managerial) systems” (Evans et al, 2016, p. 66). I believe that this can be achieved by constructing understandings about these challenges and the ideologies they represent. This is how we build local small-scale knowledge we can leverage to strategise and implement meaningful educational change on a larger scale. This is what I have started to do in this chapter.

As a popular Jamaican saying goes: “one-one coco full basket”. This refers to the reaping of coco, a root crop which is a staple Jamaican food. Poor subsistence farmers sometimes find it difficult to locate the root in their fields because they were planted on steep hillsides with tight, clay soils. Despite the challenges, they persist in digging for the coco. A testament to their resilience and faith that their efforts will eventually lead to filling a basket, one coco at a time. In keeping with the wisdom of my local context, I have faith that if I continue to consistently advocate for and model critical, caring pedagogy, I will produce some small measure of change. I am confident there is value in sharing experiences and insights with my peers, my students, and others, as ways of inviting them to “see” and “read” and understand the challenges they must overcome before they can effect meaningful pedagogical change. This approach, I suggest, is key to strengthening my position that a critical pedagogy of caring can help improve the teaching and learning future of higher education in Jamaica and beyond.

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