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VIEWPOINT

Kindness

Stephen Rowland*

Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK

Students readily see kindness as a mark of the good teacher. Yet the concept of kindness is singularly silent in accounts of teaching excellence, student satisfaction or professional values. It seems to have little place in a world driven by competitive individualism.

Many see the financial 'crash' to have been the consequence of such narrow competitive self-interest in the economic world, whose values have extended well beyond the world of finance. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, John Lanchester shows how the 'economic metaphor', which has come to apply to every aspect of modern life, including education, has failed. As a consequence, he says, 'we need to rediscover other sources of value' (Lanchester 2009, 13).

There are good reasons for understanding kindness to be a natural predisposition. In fact, the word 'kind' has the same etymological roots as 'kin', 'kindred' (family) and 'kind' ('type'). This is suggestive of a natural relationship of kindness between members of the same family, group or species. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (2007) gives the first definition of 'kindly' as 'existing or occurring according to the laws of nature', thus implying that kindness is natural. Stoic philosophy celebrated the natural order as a basis of its ethics. Thus the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a leading Stoic philosopher, speaks of kindness as 'mankind's greatest delight' (Philips and Taylor 2009, 18).

Might kindness therefore be a 'natural' source of value in need of rediscovery?

In their recent book *On kindness*, psychoanalyst Adam Philips and feminist historian Barbara Taylor (2009) give an historical account of how we have come to under-value kindness in a social context in which people are fundamentally antagonistic towards each other.

From an educational perspective, and drawing on Lyotard's 'report on knowledge', with its concept of the 'terrors of performativity' (1984), Stephen Ball and others have analysed how a culture of surveillance and audit have led practitioners to 'find their values challenged or displaced by the terrors of performativity' (Ball 2003, 216). Kindness is one such displaced value. A love of knowledge and a concern for social justice are others.

It is vital that we are able to speak about such values as kindness in our professional lives. To do so might give us hope in a situation where the critiques which Ball and others have offered are so apposite. It might also play a part in following Lanchester's project to 'rediscover other sources of value' other than the economic ones which prevail.

But speaking (or writing) about kindness in the context of research, or indeed any discussion of education, brings about embarrassment. Such embarrassment signifies a transgression of accepted boundaries: what Mary Douglas (1966) calls 'matter out of place'. 'Kindness' is 'out of place' in talk about education. It can suggest a sentimental and unrigorous approach, take us into fields better addressed by therapy, indicate fanciful new-ageism, and so on. Or in the attempt to

*Email: s.rowland@ucl.ac.uk

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avoid such dangers routinisation becomes the consequence of the application of reductive logic. The critical function of 'reflection', for example has, in some areas of professional training, been largely reduced to a trivial training mantra by the application of such logic. In the same way kindness – 'mankind's greatest delight' and a basis for ethics – might be transformed to a mere transferable skill. That's how performativity works.

Risk is not only involved in writing about kindness, but in the kind act itself. A journal editor colleague recently told me how he followed up his rejection letter to an unsuccessful contributor with a more personal communication in which he outlined some ideas about how she might develop her writing. It did not take a great effort on his part but, although she was unknown to him, he guessed she would be distraught that her writing had been received with much criticism; he wanted to help. In taking this unusual step, he was anxious that his 'advice' may seem patronising, or that it might soften a critique of her writing from which she might learn, or that he was simply stepping inappropriately outside his role as editor. From her reply it appeared, however, that his fears were unfounded and his advice was gratefully received. But he might have got it wrong. I'm sure I have often sent students down the wrong track with the best of intentions.

Meeting the needs of someone else is not at all straightforward. Sometimes having to 'be cruel to be kind' warns us, perhaps, that the kindest teacher is not necessarily the one who receives the highest satisfaction ratings. But nor should we assume that we know what students need better than they do. Boswell's adage that 'the path to Hell is paved with good intentions' also warns us that the kindness of a deed is not assured by kindly intentions alone. But this is no excuse for cynically ignoring the prompts of conscience.

The legal concept of 'due care' and the associated business concept of 'due diligence' are attempts to avoid such difficulties by placing care within a set of professional requirements or standards. In the same vain, ethics committees attempt to simplify complex ethical judgement by the application of rules. But kindness always goes beyond any such requirement. My colleague's original reject letter to the unsuccessful writer fulfilled all the requirements for due care. No more was required in his role as editor. The follow up letter, together with its attendant risks and the unpredictability of its outcome, constituted a small act of kindness. It was 'beyond the call of duty'; he could not have been held to account for omitting to do this. But he would, it appeared, have held himself to account had he failed to. While one can be held to account for a lack of due care, one cannot be held to account for a lack of kindness.

The difference between being held to account and holding oneself to account is crucial. It involves alienation and responsibility. Only when holding myself to account am I acting with human agency. It is, of course, important that teachers, doctors, and other public servants are held to account by the public they serve. The problem arises when this requirement leads to a substitution of a personal quality, kindness, by a public one, a duty of care. As a teacher I am rightly held to account for exercising a duty of care to my students. But, if I am to maintain my humanity, it seems that I have to hold myself to account for my exercise of kindness. While I can be held to account for my exercise of professional values, I can only hold my self to account for the expression of my personal or human values.

The nature of the connection between kindness and teaching rests in the fact that both kindly acts and pedagogical acts require the actor to identify with the concerns of the other. In serving the needs of the student, the good teacher attempts to see things from the student's perspective. This is an essential prerequisite of kindness too. My colleague's follow up letter was kind not simply because he would thereby lessen the painfulness of the original rejection letter, but because he identified with the writer's developmental needs. His act was kind inasmuch as it was pedagogically sound. But it was dangerous inasmuch as he was stepping outside the

bounds of his normal editorial responsibility. Even as a teacher, one can never actually adopt the learner's perspective.

Another difficulty with kindness is its confusion with leniency. In wanting a kind teacher does the student really want one who will be lenient, soft, prepared to overlook errors and shallowness of thought? In wanting to be kind is the teacher really motivated by the learner's needs, or simply avoiding responsibility for the student's confrontation with the inevitable pain of learning?

With such inherent dangers it is perhaps not surprising that kindness, as a virtue, became associated with safety of domestic rather than working life, and thus feminised. Philips and Taylor demonstrate that kindness, which had previously played a central role in public morality, was displaced and downgraded as a consequence of industrialisation and the rise of Protestantism. By the early nineteenth century, it had become the prerogative of specific constituencies, such as clergymen, romantic poets and women (Philips and Taylor 2009, 41). A Victorian stereotype comes to mind of the middle class father earning the income from the cut and thrust of industrial employment, while his wife keeps an atmosphere of kindness and safety in the home where children play (and learn) and to which the father returns for refreshment. The nostalgic paintings of William Powell Frith (1819–1909) celebrate such domesticated kindness and its contrast with industrial energy.

Such a gendered version of kindness underpins institutional ideals of teaching. In a study of the relationships between teaching and research, heads of department in a research led university were asked what qualities they associated with successful teachers and researchers (Rowland 1996). Respondents typically mentioned 'drive', 'self-motivation', 'stickability', 'confidence' and the ability to 'go out into the world and get it' as typical of the successful researcher. Good teachers, in contrast, were represented by the more 'feminine' qualities of 'openness', 'care' and 'concern for students'. The distinction is redolent of the industrial and domestic worlds portrayed by Frith's paintings. Since 1996, when this study was reported, quality assurance systems have further transformed the 'domestic' space of teaching into the public space of work. As teaching performance becomes increasingly accountable, so the personal quality of kindness is replaced by more manageable routines of 'due care'.

Kindness, however, extends beyond the private domestic sphere and is not limited to public performative function. There was nothing soft or domesticated about Aurelius's celebration of kindness as 'mankind's greatest delight'. In his Stoic philosophy justice was natural and a consequence of the exercise of reason. As such it was the primary virtue to which kindness and the other virtues naturally contributed (Aurelius 167, paragraph IX).

Kindness as a public virtue, built upon a commitment to social justice, embraces critique. In educational research the term 'critical friend' is used by action researchers to describe the relationship between co-enquirers (be they researchers or students) who share a commitment to social justice. It combines the kindness of friendship with the critique of the educator. Developed in relation to practitioner research in schools, by such writers as John Elliott (1985) and Wilf Carr (1986), its theoretical roots are traced back to critical theory.

Through such resources we might begin to rediscover an educational concept of kindness which resists both nostalgic sentimentalisation and the tendency to routinisation that characterise much professional life. Just as intellectual love can be seen to underlie the relationship between learner and subject matter (Rowland 2008), so might the opportunity for kindness be a significant dimension of educational relationships.

To what extent are our institutional contexts open to, and conducive of, acts of kindness? In what ways do students expect kindness from their teachers? Is this a value which teachers hold to be important in their work? Such questions are open to empirical investigation as part of an attempt to rediscover the ethical value of kindness in educational work and move beyond the worn out economic model that has come to dominate our working lives.

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