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# Assess compassion in Higher Education?

## Why and how would we do that?

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**Abstract:** This article reports the effects (on students' social and learning experiences) of supporting students in the use of explicitly compassionate interactional strategies during their weekly seminar interactions. Also reported is the impact of this practice on individual performances in critical thinking in seminars.

**Methods:** Findings of a cross disciplinary search on compassion were used to design a compassion focussed pedagogy (a CfP) for the university seminar. This pedagogy was then trialled, through action research, in two departments in a UK HEI. N=97 Humanities under and post graduate students and n=60 Business undergraduates participated in subject seminars that were run using the CfP. Template analysis was used to identify themes in the qualitative data sets: field notes of observed behaviours in seminars run with and without the CfP, films of assessed CfP seminars (n=48 students), and interviews and focus groups (n=33 students). In a final participating business module of ethnically diverse students, statistical analysis explored the effects of the CfP on individual critical thinking performances (n=38).

**Findings:** Overall, students were attitudinally inclined to increase efforts over time to enhance their own and others' social and learning experiences in seminars through compassionate behavioural interventions during discussions; they achieved, or failed to achieve this, in observable ways that were seen and agreed to be appropriate to assess as credit bearing towards their under and post graduate degrees by five out of five external examiners. Students found eye contact – inclusive, excluding or avoidant – was critical to mediating the spread of participation in their seminars. Findings also suggested, tentatively, the potential of the CfP to substantially change the national attainment gap in terms of critical thinking in seminars.

## Introduction

Across disciplines, compassion is defined as the *noticing* of distress and/or disadvantage to self or others, and a commitment to *take action* to reduce it (P. Gilbert, 2005; Goetz et al, 2010). For the purposes of discussion based university seminars, compassion can be understood as a cognitive process: a problematic issue is identified - such as the behaviour of a monopoliser, a shy non-contributor, a non-reader - and its significance for the group's learning and social experience is evaluated; then a plan is formulated (and when, possible, executed) to address the issue kindly and proactively. This process appears to require some cognitive resourcefulness. But compassion is a skill that can be practised like any other problem solving process and people can become proficient at it (P. Gilbert, 2005).

This study selected the university seminar room as a highly appropriate space for students to practise the cognitive processing that compassion demands; it is where people work in groups on task focussed discussion - face to face, and with tutors present to observe and help. Of interest to the study was that much literature suggests the negative impacts of communicative barriers between students in task focussed groups, are faced by BME and/or international students only. For example, in the literature on internationalising the curriculum, Turner (2009) identified that ethnocentrism amongst her local students was causing communicative barriers in their group work with international students. The local students

tended to pathologise the silences in group discussions that the international students told Turner they needed if they were to find a way into these discussions. Elsewhere, in the USA, Page-Gould et al's (2008) study found high levels of cortisol (a stress indicator) in Latino university students when they were paired for discussion with white American students. In the UK, the National Union of Students (2009, p7) identified from a survey of 938 BME (including international students), that many considered their learning experiences to be negative, with 23 per cent describing it as 'cliquey', 17 per cent as 'isolating'; 8 per cent as 'hostile'. International students, "frequently expressed feelings of isolation and alienation" (p5). Of direct relevance to my study's exploration of compassion in the seminar room, the NUS concludes

Many of these feelings spawned from inside the classroom, with several respondents describing feeling left out of discussions and debates (p4).

The report recommends that FE and HE work harder "to promote social cohesion and better integrate their student bodies" (p61). It states that "social inclusion" and "social cohesion" (p61) "could be achieved by increasing discussion and interactive work within the classroom" (p61).

One difficulty I have with the above research is that, as a teacher of Academic English for 20 years, I have found in my own research that all of the above difficulties (Turner, 2008, 2009; Page-Gould et al, 2008; the NUS, 2009) happen amongst and between white, local UK students too (T. Gilbert, 2012). The results of a study of staff and student HE experiences in India and the UK suggests why. The study, conducted by Thornton et al (2012) across five HE campuses, found that language, nationality, race, region, class, caste, religion and age groupings were all "clearly identified by students and staff as the basis for separation" (p8). Thus, a greater research focus on solutions that address deeper psychosocial levels of shared, not different, human experience is needed now. This must take account of the necessarily competitive nature of the HE academic environment, but a careful (re)consideration of what *kinds* of competitive behaviours HE should nurture and value may be currently overdue (Chickering, 2010). On the basis of the situation outlined so far, and because scholarship in anthropology has identified that the concept of compassion is understood and valued across cultures (Feather 2006; Schwartz and Bardi, 2001), I formulated the following research question for this study:

Could the concept of compassion be embedded into pedagogy for seminars and if so what might be the impacts, if any, on social and learning experiences and on academic achievement, for students who were white local, black local, ethnic minority local or international?

## Methods

Below are the pedagogical and the research methods used. First, for the pedagogical methods, Fig 1 shows the CfP frame work for a whole module of seminars, and Fig 2 shows the links between the behavioural strategies this framework offers - and the literature findings. After pedagogical methods, the research methods used to address the above question will be explained.

### The Pedagogical Methods

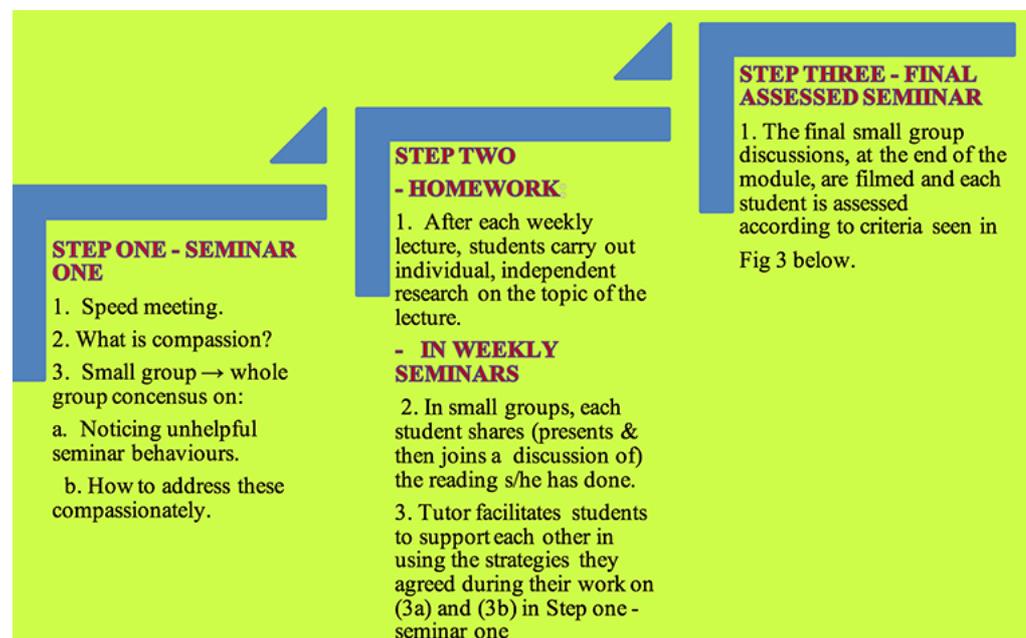


Fig 1 - The Compassion-focussed pedagogy for seminars (the CfP)

The speed meeting (seminar one, Fig 1, above) was to help prevent clique formations and to support the transparently stated goal of collegiality across the whole seminar group instead.

Then the literature on compassion (see Fig 2 and its key) was summarised to students: how compassion is defined across disciplines and why self-compassion is less tenuous and problematic than self-esteem (Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Kingston, 2008). Students were then asked to consider in small groups the following two questions suggested by a Market Research business lecturer:

What do I contribute to the learning experience of my fellow students that they most value in me?  
What do my fellow students contribute to my learning that I most value in them?

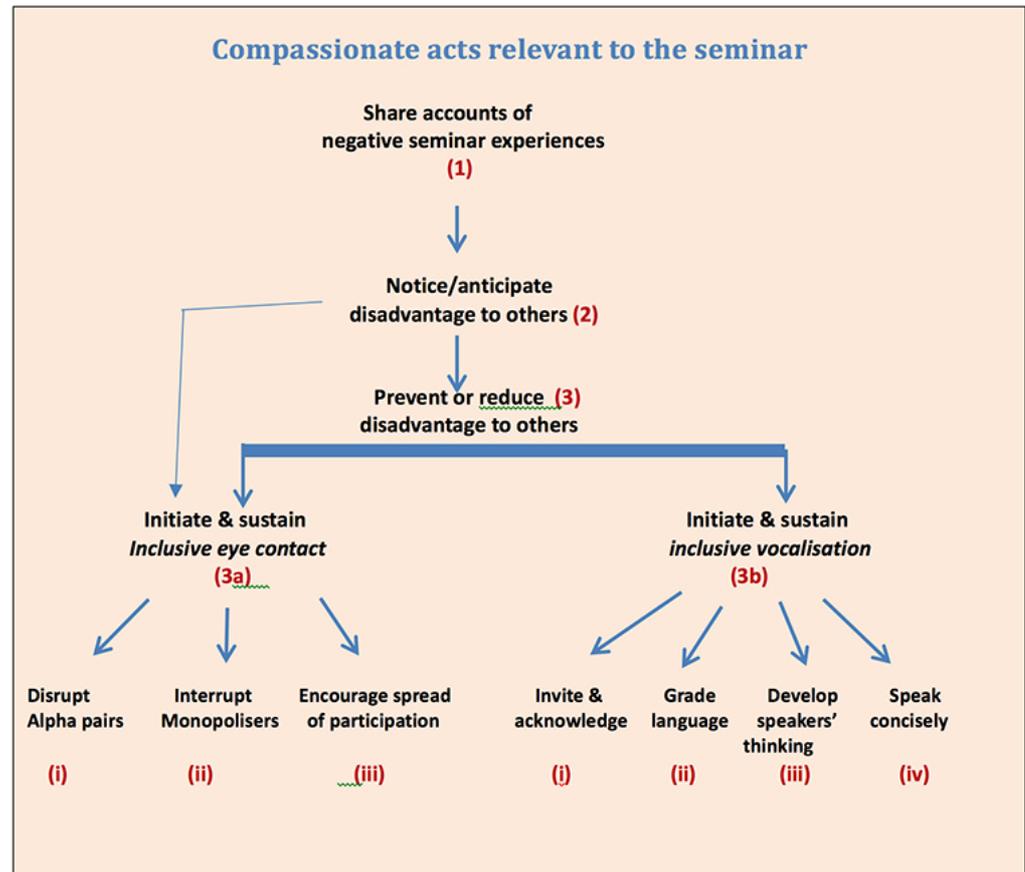


Fig 2 - Seminar relevant acts of compassion and their theoretical underpinnings.

### Key:

**(1) Students sharing.** In the first seminar, their previous experiences of seminar discussion work that might have been negative. Scott (1990), an anthropologist, explains how revealing previously hidden transcripts (accounts) of personal experience can change the dynamics in a group immediately. From the perspective of psychology, sharing such accounts means that people can feel validated; they discover they are not alone - others have had similar experiences (Leahy's Model of Validation, 2005). This can make people feel socially safer (P. Gilbert, 2009; Bates, 2005) to take risks, to think more clearly and to venture more.

**(2) Paying close attention to fellow group members.** Using video tapes of children in their classrooms, the linguistic ethnographer McDermott (1989) developed micro-ethnographic skills of noticing non-verbal signals, and the distress these were signalling, of so-called disruptive children in class rooms. In relation to this study, the first component of compassion is to notice. McDermott's study suggested that students might also be able to develop their skills at noticing, and reflecting on reasons for others' lived experiences of seminars: their silences, their hesitations, their monopolising and so on.

**(3) Acting to prevent disadvantage to fellow students' social and learning experiences,** by using any of the following strategies:

#### 3a. Initiating and sustaining inclusive eye contact around the group whenever speaking, in order to:

- i. *Disrupt alpha pairs.* Bion (1961), a group psychotherapist identified that in task focussed groups, there was a tendency sometimes for two people (an alpha pair) to assume leadership of the group, and then for others to come to rely on them in dysfunctional ways that disabled the group from task achievement.
- ii. *Interrupt individual monopolising behaviours.* Yalom (1985) another group psychotherapist, identified that monopolisers blocked others out of discussion partly so that they should not be challenged or questioned. He noted that they sometimes dominated discussions because they were anxious but that to silence the monopoliser was not helpful to the group: "you do not want to hear less ...; you want to hear more" (Yalom's and Leszcz's italics, p378), i.e. more of substance. In a different vein, Chickering (2010) points to a strong current of neo liberalism in modern HE which he says has over-promoted students' individualistic

competitiveness amongst, and at the expense of, their fellow students. Whether from Yalom's perspective or Chickering's, monopolising is what Nitsun (1996), another group psychotherapist, rightly refers to as an anti-group behaviour.

iii. *Encourage a more equal spread of vocal participation.* From computer science, Vertegaal and Ding (2002) and Vertegaal et al (2003) discovered, by tracking eye gaze during group discussions via video conferencing, that where speakers' eye contact was inclusive of other members of the group, there were two consequences. The first was a more equal spread of participation around the group. The second was an enhanced quality of decision making processes by the group as a whole. This key finding in the literature indicated the possible role of eye contact in how Yalom's monopolisers and Bion's alpha pairs were setting themselves up to take control of the group in often, unconscious ways. My close observations of small group discussion interactions in a range of subject seminars confirmed this repeatedly (see a. i and ii, above).

### 3b. Initiating and sustaining inclusive vocalisation, as through:

- i. Inviting quieter members to speak; validating and acknowledging each other's contributions.
- ii. Grading/standardising English language use for effective international communication amongst culturally diverse students who might have different levels of familiarity with non-standard English (slang, colloquialisms and so on).
- iii. Developing speakers' thinking processes through critiquing what they say (Yalom and Leszsz, 1985).
- iv. Speaking concisely for management of the discussion time available and thus helping facilitate a more equal spread of participation.

Overall, except for (1) above, all of the above required students to observe for signs of appropriate action to be taken and this depended heavily on inclusive eye contact by any speaker, sweeping constantly around the group, to observe for such signals. Eye contact was also used as a follow up intervention in itself. For example, a colluder in an alpha pair and/or with a monopoliser could notice that situation and break eye contact gently with the partner (monopoliser) channelling it to others by looking at them instead of the monopoliser. This signal, pre-agreed with students in the first seminar, would send a signal to the over-talker that others were to be addressed also [c.f. Vertegaal et al (2003)].

## Practical compassion in the seminar room: How can this be assessed?

The concept of compassion may not be a controversial one for some disciplines, but overall, it remains so in education. Here in Fig 3, the compassionate strategies were strategically re-termed, 'group management skills' by the subject tutor in order to keep the CfP in place beyond the study.

*Fig 3 - Small group, research-based discussion: Marking criteria*

## The Research methods

The pedagogy framework in Fig 1 was used as a research tool to answer the research question.

The study adopted an action research approach, and was divided into two cycles. Cycle 1 was conducted amongst mainly white, local students in a Humanities department where n=105 students were observed in their seminars, some of whom n=14 participated in one-to-one interviews or focus groups. Cycle 2 was conducted amongst more diverse cohorts of students in the same HEI's Business department where n=135 students were observed, some of whom n= 19 participated in one-to-one interviews or focus groups. Five sampling methods and several data collection tools were combined to support the use of Template Analysis for comparative, thematic data analysis. Micro-ethnographic method was used to conduct close weekly observations of the seminars for interactional processes and possible critical incidents in these. Particular attention was given to how any of these processes or key incidents could be attributed to factors other than the introduction of CfP into these seminars.

In addition to qualitative investigation of the impact, if any, of the CfP on student participants' social and learning experiences, their individual academic achievement - specifically in the area of critical thinking - was also investigated. For this, Fisher and Mann-Whitney tests were used to carry out a statistical comparison of summative, individual percentage marks given for critical thinking in a sample module of 38 business students. The comparison was made between critical thinking marks achieved in two assignments on the participating module. Each assignment was marked

and moderated by the same two business tutors. In particular, they double marked every individual seminar performance. These 38 students were ethnically diverse and so it was possible to compare the results they achieved in critical thinking - under compassion relevant conditions - with the national attainment gap of 18% that exists between white local and BME/international students (NUS, 2009). This percentage gap was similarly reflected at the study's host university. All assessed seminars in this study were filmed for external examiner inspection and researcher analysis, again using micro-ethnographic method.

## Findings and Discussion

### Effects on academic achievement in seminars: assessed critical thinking

In relation to individual performances in critical thinking, the circa 18% national BME attainment gap (Broeke and Nicholls, 2007; NUS, 2009) was closed on the participant business module. Fig 4 below shows the mean percentage marks for critical thinking in the seminar discussion compared to critical thinking in the essay, for each local and international group.

<u>Student Categories</u>		<b>Essay: Critical thinking % age marks</b>	<b>Seminar Critical thinking % age marks</b>
Black Local	(n= 8)	56.25	66.25
Ethnic Minority Local	(n=17)	53.35	65.41
International	(n= 5)	67.00	68.50
White Local	(n= 8)	70.93	69.62

Fig 4 - Summary of means of percentage marks per assignment on a module in Cycle 2

Differences in the groups' means for the essay were tested with the Fisher test and the same test was then applied again to each group's mean for critical thinking (CT) in seminars for which the p value was  $p > 0.05$ . Taking the results of these tests together, the differences between black local, ethnic minority local, international and white local students' CT marks were statistically different for the essay and so showed an attainment gap. However, in contrast to the national attainment gap and that of the university, the seminar percentage marks showed no statistical difference between the groups for critical thinking performance. This is not explained simply by the difference between a written and oral assignment even allowing for other factors.

More than half of the students (21 out of 38 students) achieved higher marks for critical thinking in their assessed seminars than their essays. The increases ranged from 10% to 40% for over a third (n=13) of the whole sample. These are too large and too many to be attributable entirely to non CfP-related factors. Most of the major upward shifts in CT marks, from essay to seminar, occurred amongst local black and local ethnic minority students.

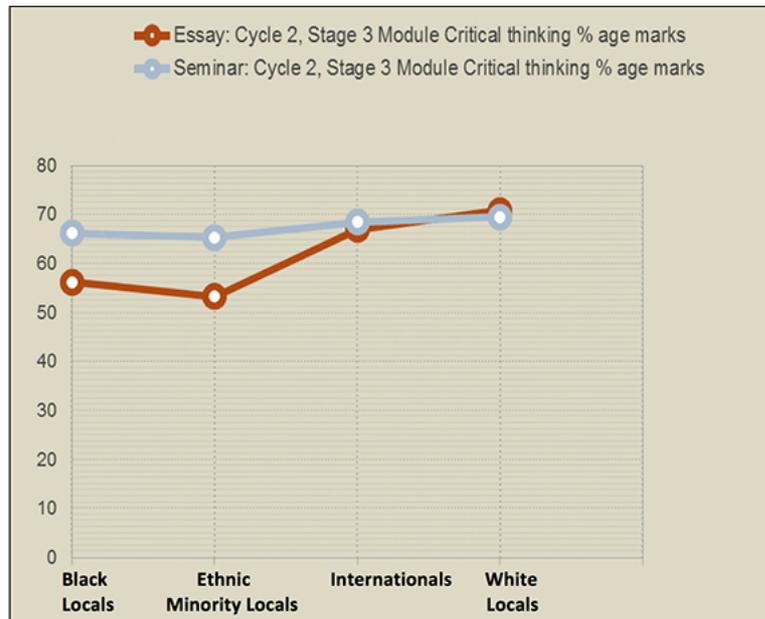


Fig 5 - Differences in % marks for critical thinking between ethnic groups for essay and for CfP seminar discussions

A Mann-Whitney test was applied to compare between the white students and all other students - as a single BME category that included international students. This replicated the categorisation used by the National Union of Students in its 2009 study of the national (18%) attainment gap. Significant differences were found ( $p < 0.001$ ) for the BME means for the essay compared to the white students, but for CT in the seminars, there was no significant difference between the BME students and the white students ( $p = 0.195$ ). Again, these findings for higher cognitive processing by participants under CfP conditions did not confirm the NUS's (2009) research findings on the national attainment gap.

## Effects of the CfP on social and learning experiences

Mid module and post assessment student follow up interviews/focus groups corroborated the literature on why and how, if people feel safer/make each other feel safer in groups, they think faster, more integratively, more creatively (Cozolino, 2013; P. Gilbert, 2005, 2007; Bates, 2005). It appears these students' cognitive resources were not being drained into routine, social self-defence which derails cognitive function.

Overall, students became adept at interrupting excluding eye contact, including where this involved an individual over talker. In observations also it was found that monopolisers' responses to such interruptions appeared to be self-conscious, but also immediate, corrective and good humoured and that this was received with good humour and signals of approval by fellow students.

Some students modified the suggested CfP strategies originally offered, making the CfP an emergent practice that was conducted amongst and between students. It was seen on the fly as discussions unfolded, and with some flexibility, but there was consistent adherence to the core principle, as far as could be identified, of noticing or anticipating seminar-related disadvantage to others and attempting to remove or reduce it.

### Cycle 1: Conducted amongst mainly white local students (n = 97)

Overall, despite the small sample size, analysis of cycle 1 data suggests that white local students were as subject to communicative difficulties in seminar discussions as international students. They feared being thought of as less articulate than others, saying something foolish, or giving 'wrong' responses to questions. The CfP appeared to be of use in addressing the affective states of some of these local white students, in that 12 out of 14 students provided evidence that they were becoming more aware of the help available from others, and of what they were also doing to help their fellow students achieve spread of participation and progress group thinking processes.

 All we had to really think about was that we were helping each other... .. we stalled ... we stalled. We knew we'd help each other.

(White local female PG) 

 At undergraduate level, I often used to get quite annoyed... when we got people who were so shy that they wouldn't talk, you'd sort of think, "Well, I want to get something out of this, so I will talk." And ....you realise, "Well no, we're also responsible for making sure other people have things to say and want to talk."

(White local female PG) 

To this end, eye contact was a frequent theme.

 ... everyone in the group's talking because you look at everyone...

(White local female UG) 

### Cycle 2: Conducted amongst nationally and ethnically diverse students (n = 60)

With notable similarity to what had emerged from cycle one, themes emerging from cycle 2 also related to students' feelings of immediate responsibility for their own and others' social and learning experiences:

 I have to meet them and I have to compare - and do a lot of research myself. So I have a lot to contribute.

(Black male student, UG) 

 I could ask questions about topics I did not understand... I know if I have some trouble with a word they [the CfP students] are going to help me....I wanted to ask interesting questions - relevant questions about the texts of the other group members. We all talked together and shared...

(French male student, UG) 

 They really wanted to do well in it, so I felt kind of pressured so I thought, 'I need to step up. So I really need to be involved and participate with what was going on.'

(Black local male student, UG) 

As in cycle 1, eye contact was a frequent theme. In cycle 2 it appeared in the transcripts of 14 out of 19 participants in interviews and focus groups with students linking this explicitly to enhanced learning as well as enhanced social experience:

 You wouldn't expect it with a seminar group. Like, the communication - four people to talk like that.

(Ethnic minority local male student, UG) 

 This group were very interactive... all contributed to the discussion each time... they had a REAL discussion. SUPERB Group Skills.

(Assessment feedback from Business School examiners x 2) 

 I felt not as one person but I felt as a person within an entity and the entity was my group... I felt that I was part of the group and I didn't feel like an individual at that point. It didn't make me feel like I'm focused on it. It made me feel like we're all focused on it.

(Ethnic Minority local male student, UG) 

Across the study as a whole though, two local white females, one in each cycle, appeared to feel themselves under threat during the CfP seminars and both made it obvious to others that they wished to avoid contact with them. In interviews, both students then recounted previous critical episodes or incidents of severe social stress amongst peers in education, including at school. However, by the end of their respective modules, both students appeared to have made some progress towards social integration with a number of other students in the seminars.

Overall, participant students were found to use the CfP as a *legitimising* platform, a license, from which to readily access and enact compassion. This position was held and sustained by students under live assessment conditions despite the irremovable, potential risks in this of sometimes consciously curtailing their own individual, competitive performances. Also, unexpectedly, it was found that the CfP strategies were being used by some participants beyond the action research study - for example, in job interviews, the work place and on other modules. In all cases of use beyond the study, students identified specific, positive outcomes.

The inclusion of summative assessment/course credits for compassionate behaviours appeared to positively motivate students to attempt compassionate group management, regardless of their ethnic or national status. This could be partly because compassion is a cross-culturally valued concept (Goetz et al, 2010; Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007; Schwartz and Bardi, 2001). Students did not use the compassion pedagogy differently according to whether they were local or international. This finding does not reflect the ethnic or national distinctions between students that are made in key texts on fractured, divided student communities (NUS, 2009; Harrison and Peacock, 2010; Turner, 2009; Leask, 2005). For this study, such distinctions were not only unhelpful and irrelevant; they were also found to be methodologically unreliable. Students (including local students) of supposedly one national or ethnic identity were found to have multiple such identities, as suggested might be the case by Cantle (2012) and Zapata-Barrero (2013).

## Conclusion

Out of this action research with compassion-focussed pedagogy, the CfP is being used in several modules in two departments in a UK HEI for credit bearing purposes towards degree programmes. It has been approved and/or commended by five out of five external assessors so far. Given this, and with a theoretical base that is robust and still developing from sister disciplines to support and defend them, HE educators have the right to work closely, critically and explicitly with the concept of compassion in their seminars and tutorials. These are part of the university experience of millions of students, around the world, every day. The seminar has an untapped role to play in contributing to building more collaborative societies, locally and globally.

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