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Abstract: This article presents the findings of a study on how to embed the concept of compassion explicitly into the design of pedagogy for seminars and explore the effect, if any, of this on the social and learning experiences and academic achievement of its participant students. **Methods:** Findings from a literature search on compassion-related scholarship formed the theoretical base for a compassion-focussed pedagogy (a CfP) which was designed for discussion seminars. The study was carried out in two schools of a UK HEI, and for both under and post graduate students. (N=97) Humanities students and (n=60) Business students participated in the CfP seminars. A total of (n=33) were interviewed. Template analysis was used to analyse and constantly compare the data for themes in: observation/field notes of in class CfP seminars, films of assessed CfP seminars, interviews and focus groups. **Findings:** Students adapted quickly to the cognitive processes required for compassionate action in their seminars; were effective at assuming responsibility for their own and others' social and learning experiences, and found eye contact pivotal to maintaining equal spread of participation in their seminars. Findings also suggested, tentatively, the potential of the CfP to reduce the national attainment gap in terms of critical thinking in seminars.

Assess Compassion in Higher Education? How and why would we do *that*?

Compassion is the *noticing* of distress and/or disadvantage to others and *taking action* to reduce it (P. Gilbert, 2005; Goetz et al, 2010). This means compassion can be understood as a cognitive process, rather than an as emotion, (though it may be accompanied by an emotion); it requires the ability to select out a problematic issue, identify its significance, then formulate a plan to address it and carry out that plan in accordance with a set of

environmental variables. This suggests compassion is a skill that can be practiced like any other problem solving process and people can become proficient at it (P. Gilbert, 2005). Students could explicitly practice the cognitive processing that compassion demands, in the seminar room, where people work in groups on task focussed discussion – face to face. What some may already sometimes notice in seminars, are communicative barriers between students that can arise from the behaviours of monopolisers, the silent non-contributors and the non-readers. In the literature on internationalising the curriculum, other kinds of communicative barriers between students are noted. Turner (2009) raises concerns about the ethnocentrism of local students in her university, for instance, their pathologising of silences in group discussions that international students say there need to be, in order for them to get into the discussion. Page-Gould et al's (2008) study in a US university found high levels of cortisol (a stress indicator) in Latino students when they were paired for discussion with white American students. In the UK, the National Union of Students (2009, p7) found from a survey of 938 BME and international students, that many found their learning experiences negative with 23 per cent describing it as 'cliquey', 17 per cent as 'isolating'; 8 per cent as 'hostile'. Moreover, respondents were "often speaking of alienation and exclusion (p5). Notably:

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

At the same time, international students, "frequently expressed feelings of isolation and alienation" (p5). 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).

As a tutor of Academic English for 20 years I had long noted that students tend to move about the campus in groups according to their ethnicity, and or nationality – fractured communities who are yet part of 'international' universities. I formulated the following research question: Could the concept of compassion be embedded into pedagogy for seminars and if so what might be the (possibly different) impacts, if any, on social and

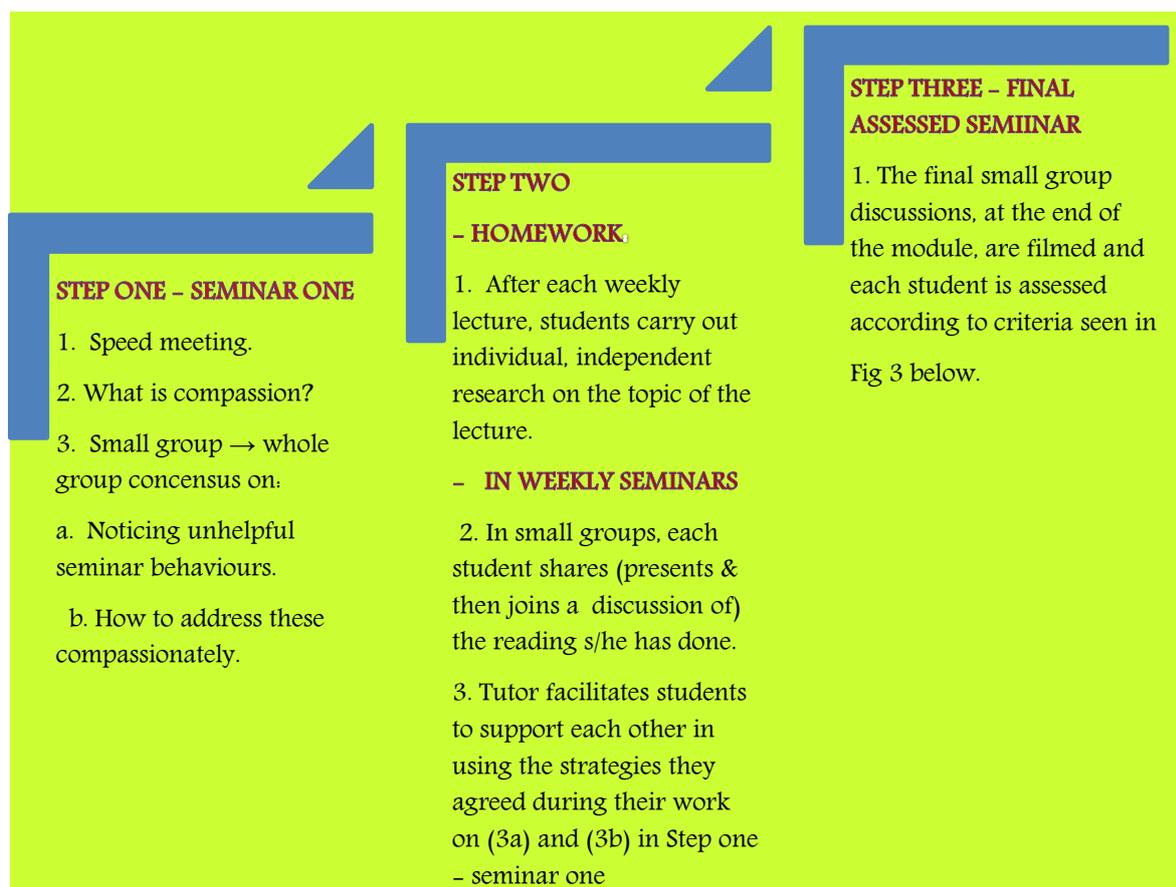
learning experiences and on academic achievement, for students who were white local, black local, ethnic minority local or international?

Methods

Below are the pedagogical methods used: Fig 1 showing the overall pedagogical frame work used for this study, and Fig 2 showing where in the literature this came from and what strategies this literature was indicating students could use to enhance their own and others' seminar experiences. 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)

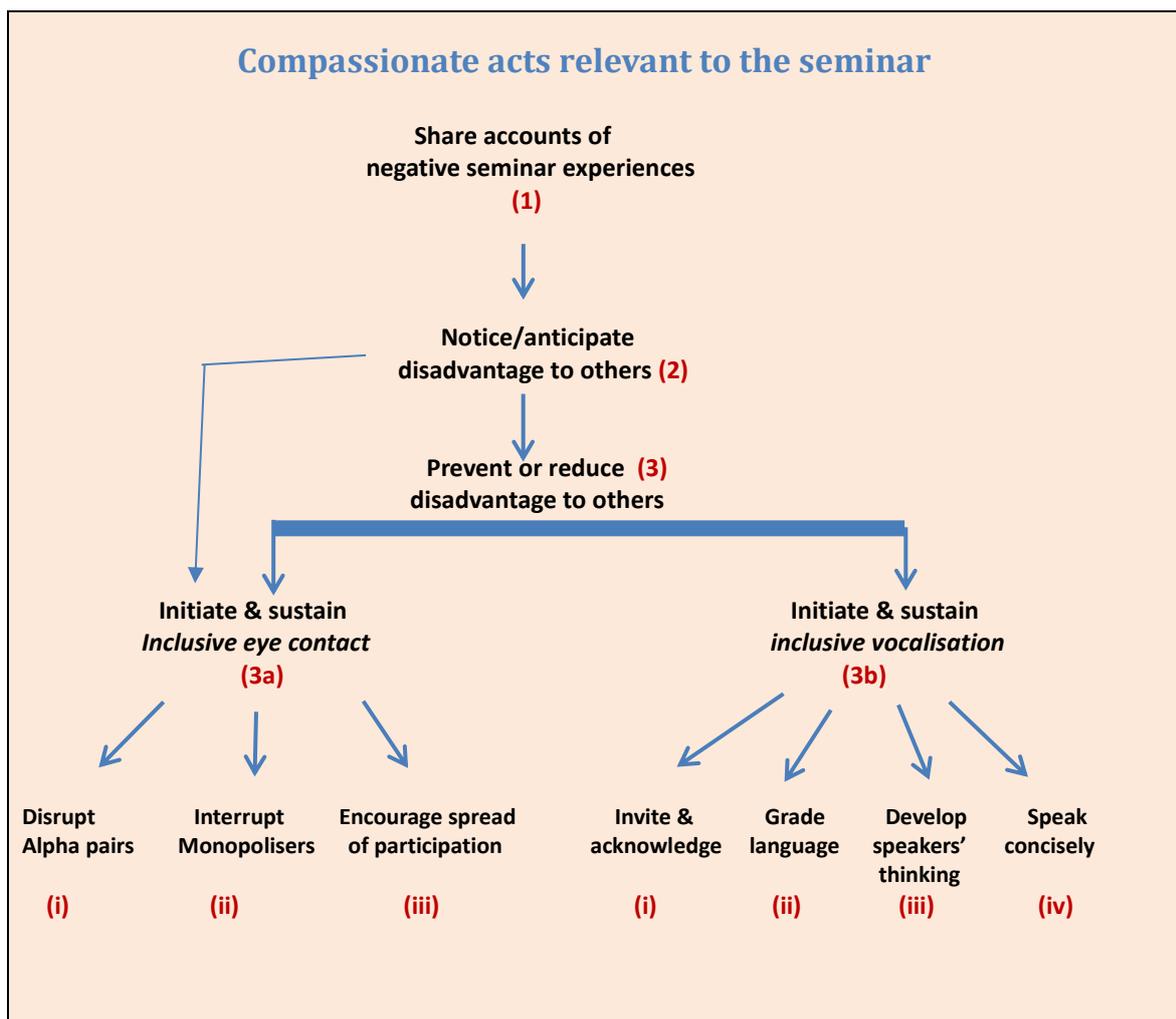


The speed meeting (seminar one, Fig 1, above) was to help unglue pre-formed cliques and explicitly set up the goal of collegiality across the whole seminar group.

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, 2003; 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 The literature findings applied: What students were invited to attempt during compassion-focused, subject seminars in History, English Lit, and Business



Key:

- (1) Disclosing** in the first seminar, therefore publicly, those previous transcripts/ narratives on personal group work experiences in seminars that might have been negative. Scott (1990), an anthropologist, explains how sharing previously hidden transcripts of personal experience can change the dynamics in a group immediately and sometimes dramatically. From the perspective of psychology, revealing such accounts means that people can feel validated; they discover they are not alone - others have had similar shared experiences (Leahy's Model of Validation, 2005). This can make people feel safer (P. Gilbert, 2009; Bates, 2005).

- (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.

- (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 others to come to rely on them, in dysfunctional ways.
 - ii. Interrupt individual monopolising behaviours. Yalom (1985) another group psychotherapist, identified that monopolisers blocked others out of discussion partly so that they could not be challenged or questioned. He held that monopolisers sometimes dominated discussions because they were anxious and 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 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.

- (3b.)** Initiate and sustain inclusive vocalisation. From computer science, Vertegaal and Ding (2002); 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. (It is reasonable to suggest that the availability of more perspectives from more equitable participation may be correlated with better-informed decision making.) 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.
- i. Invite and acknowledge, as through 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 fellow students with different levels of familiarity with non-standard English.
 - 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, 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 is currently a controversial one for educationalists to work with in matters of assessment. And so other terms can be used for compassion. This does not prohibit institutional endorsement of the use of compassion through its inclusion in the assessment system. Here in Fig 3, the compassionate strategies were re-termed, 'group management skills'.

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

Small Group, Research-based Discussion

Student: **Candidate No:** **Date:**
Tutor: **Module** **Code:**

Research and Critical Thinking (70%)		
<p>The research undertaken by the candidate for the examination topic is demonstrated to be extensive; it is appropriate in content, level and relevance. (30%)</p>	<p>A B C D E F</p>	<p>Little or no evidence is offered of sufficient and/or appropriate research.</p>
<p>Critical perspectives - as in questions posed, arguments offered, analytical and or evaluative insights into the student's own research and that contributed by others - are integrated relevantly and helpfully into the group discussion. The student helps keep the group focussed on task. (40%)</p>	<p>A B C D E F</p>	<p>Few or no critical perspectives – as in questions posed, arguments offered, analytical or evaluative insights into the student's own research and that contributed by others – are demonstrated during the discussion. The student may contribution little by remaining silent, or else may input in ways that lead the group off task.</p>
Group Management Skills (30%)		
<p>Body Language (10%)</p> <p>Eye contact and other body language is appropriately inclusive.</p>	<p>A B C D E F</p>	<p>Body language is signalling little interest or engagement with what is being said by others; or, may focus repeatedly on some students to the exclusion of others.</p>
<p>Language (10%) is graded (it is international English and it is appropriately paced). It is also mindful in other aspects when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disagreeing and/or critiquing • Questioning • Enacting inclusivity skills (see below) 	<p>A B C D E F</p>	<p>Student may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speak too fast; or too quietly • use excluding, localised English • use inappropriately individualistic or disrespectful language when challenging or questioning others, or when enacting some group management strategies.
<p>Group management strategies (10%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliciting , encouraging, acknowledging • Accommodating reasonable hesitations/silences while less confident speakers are engaging the group's attention • Checking understanding of the group when speaking • Intervening proactively and compassionately in the excluding behaviours of others, e.g. monopolising 	<p>A B C D E F</p>	<p>Student may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tend to monopolise discussion or speak over others <p>Student may make little or no attempt to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • check the group's understanding (of his/her own research) e.g. when presenting an unfamiliar term/concept • get clarification when it is needed during presentations • listen to and respond relevantly to others • proactively support the efforts of others to contribute effectively to group task achievement.

Comments:

First assessor..... Second assessor Grade:

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 each achieved in critical thinking - under comparison 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.

Fig 4. Summary of means of percentage marks per assignment

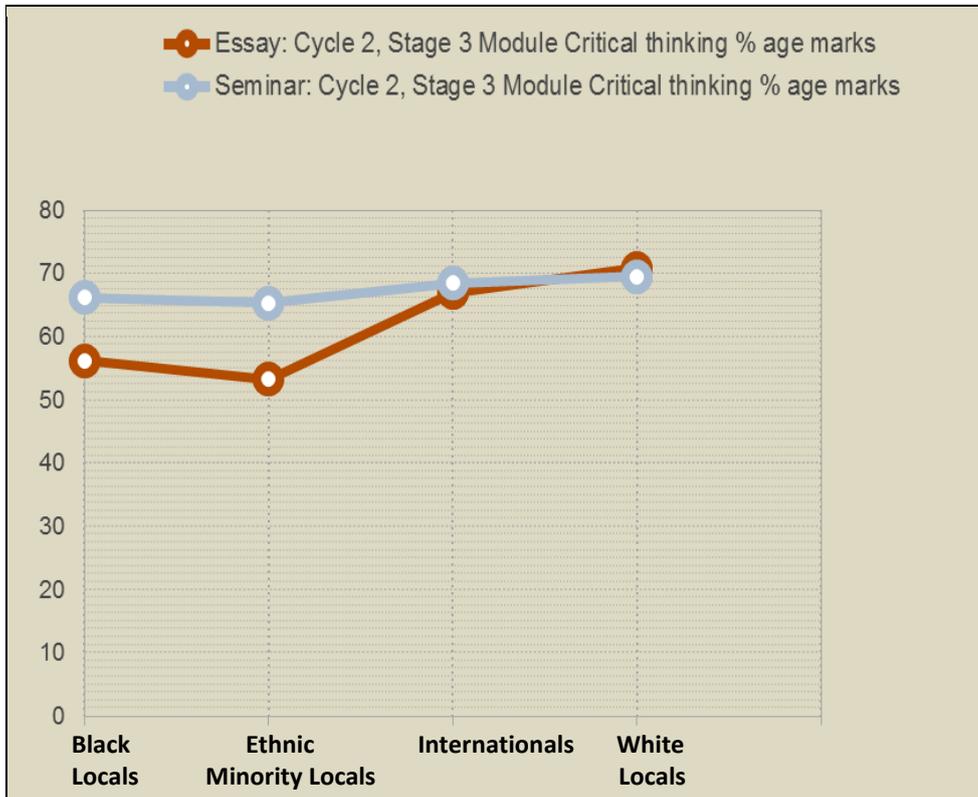
Cycle 2, Stage 3 Module			
<u>Student Categories</u>		<i>Essay: Critical thinking % age marks</i>	<i>Seminar Critical thinking % age marks</i>
Black Local	(n= 8)	56.25	66.25
Ethnic Minority Local	(n=17)	53.35	65.41
International	(n= 5)	67.00	68.50
White Local	(n= 8)	70.93	69.62

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.

On the other hand, this was a small sample; these results may not be replicated in other samples and so they are offered cautiously, pending further research.

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." Andyou 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 ethnical 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 other's 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).

*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)***

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)

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)

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)

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 or support 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; Haigh, 2002). 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-Barreo (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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