Self-Compassion:
Growing Resilience and Perspective-Taking in Turbulent Times

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Abstract

COVID-19 has brought disruption across the globe. Yet, disruption or disequilibration is a starting place in transformative learning which can produce positive change and growth.
Empathy within TL is explored and the practice of empathy is situated within self-compassion. Self-compassion can support the teacher through disequilbration and assist in developing resilience and perspective-taking. Furthermore, it will support the teacher inwardly in their person and outwardly in their practice. We conclude with concrete steps to develop self-compassion.

Keywords: Self-compassion, self-care practice, empathy, transformative learning, teachers

Introduction

While Covid-19 has had a significant impact on all parts of our lives, the educational community specifically has taken a brutal blow. This has impacted the entire learning community from K-12 to higher education; students, teachers, and administrators who will be referred to as educators herein. Most educators' workload increased with the sudden shift to online learning. Pressure on schools expanded as decisions regarding in-school attendance waffled. Loss of income in some universities resulted in insecurity regarding employment for many. With some institutions re-opening in the fall of 2020, the risk of COVID-19 exposure for school staff and teachers increased dramatically with its additional concerns.

The added burden on teachers without adequate resources or preparation for their increased workload impacted the emotional health of many. As a result of the pandemic, the burden for moving classes online was, in some cases, put on the classroom teacher or lecturer (many without experience in the field) with minimal support from the school system. Additionally, some schools facing parental and other pressures offered both virtual and face-to-face instruction, requiring educators to teach virtually and face-to-face synchronously. The toll on teachers has been high. In Arizona, 43% of teachers who retired or resigned in 2020 listed COVID-19 as their primary concern (Irish, 2020). In addition, 1,138 teachers took a full-year, unpaid leave of absence due to COVID-19.

With many educators in survival mode, stories abound of the best and the worst of responses to their students. Some, without reflecting on the student's personal grief and loss, required obituaries to be excused from class. Others required a COVID-19 test for excused absences during self-isolation, with a negative result penalizing the student with an unexcused absence. On the other hand, there were great acts of compassion. Some educators reached out to absent students with concerned questions and offers of help. Others granted time off, retakes, or adjusted the work according to the student's needs. Universities selected differing corporate responses to the pandemic. Some moved to a pass/fail system, while others insisted on life as usual making no compensations for the pandemic.

Initially, these responses appear to be binary. Some doubled down on class requirements in order to maintain academic standards, while others displayed kindness and support for the student. Yet, these responses could also be the result of a third possibility—a overstressed teacher, possibly close to burnout trying to do what they thought best at the time. Extreme levels of stress during the pandemic are understandable given the circumstances.

In times like these, how can an educator cope? What is the appropriate response to these circumstances? Rather than praising empathy or shaming the lack of empathic responses we offer a third approach. Authentic empathy is rooted in self-compassion and starts with the inner person of the educator. To assist the educator in empathy, it is important to take stock of the educator's compassion toward themselves. With a pandemic raging through the US, political upheaval and continued unrest on the streets, these additional layers of stress have the power to unsettle even resilient educators. As we are all carrying extra stress and grief, empathy is an important gift we can offer to ourselves as well as to each other.

Understanding Empathy

A closer look empathy reveals a lack of clarity around its definition. The German origin of empathy, *Einfühlung*, is roughly translated as "feeling into" (Kouprie & Visser, 2009) or "feeling" as well as connected to the Greek roots of *em* and *pathos* (Mercer & Reynolds, 2002). Rogers (1962) proposed that empathy is rooted in unconditional acceptance and commonality of human needs that transferred into a desire to support and help each other. Professional counselors and psychologists agree on three specific skills of empathy: sharing someone else's feelings; "the cognitive ability to intuit what another person is feeling," and the move to respond with compassion to that person's needs (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Empathy includes both perspective-taking and compassion.

Empathic development begins when a child recognizes themselves as a separate individual (L. W. Hoffman, 1979). Around age two, the child will begin to feel empathy, but most often will not be able to act on it. Between ages six and seven, children can identify with another person's context and can consciously put themselves in someone else's shoes. During the teenage years, these youth can think abstractly and are able to offer comprehensive empathy to abstract groups of people such as refugees or victims of crime. One's homelife and relationships with others such as parents and teachers influence the development of empathy. Those in loving relationships wherein empathy is modeled are more likely to be empathic. Conversely, children raised in harsh and abusive settings will likely not be as successful in their empathic development.

Research indicates that growth in empathy begins within an individual (L. W. Hoffman, 1979; M. L. Hoffman, 1987). An increase in one's self-compassion is a springboard for extending empathy to others. Furthermore, educators, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, are creating environments which can cultivate or crush empathy in students.

There are five modes of empathy which build on one another (M. L. Hoffman, 2000). Mimicry refers to a key ability where an infant is able to mimic the expressions of others. Classical conditioning refers to experiencing a tough situation in a group. Direct association when we can connect our emotions we are feeling to a past event or story. Language-mediated association is where the only requirement is telling about a story incident for an emotional response. The final mode is role, or perspective-taking, an important part of the transformative learning process. Perspective-taking occurs when a person imagines what it would be like to be someone else. This mode is the most advanced and requires regular practice and healthy boundaries (M. L. Hoffman, 2000; Schertz, 2006).
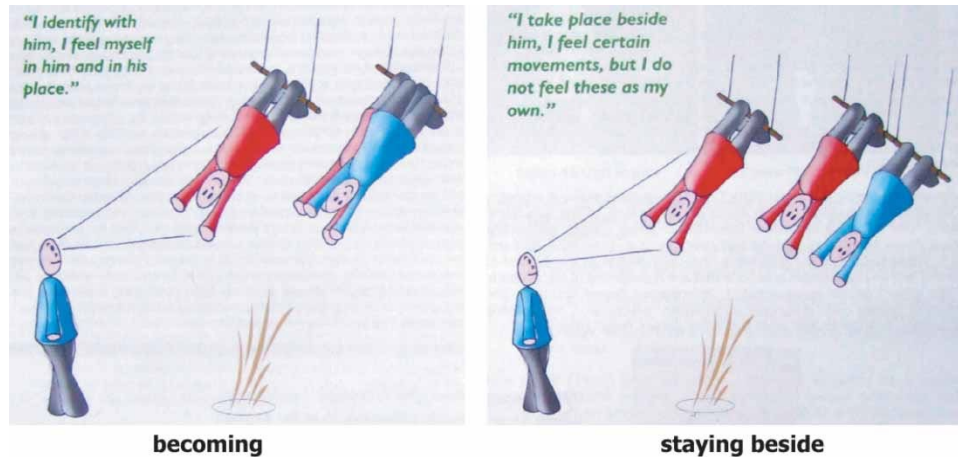
Figure 1: (Kouprie, & Visser, 2009).

There are multiple opinions regarding the relationship between the person offering empathy and the one receiving it. Some perceive that when empathizing occurs there are no longer boundaries between two people (Lipps, 1903 as cited in Kouprie & Visser, 2009). This is demonstrated on the left in Figure 1; they become "one person." The person offering empathy has vicariously assumed the feelings of the other as their own feelings. This position is problematic as one can no longer look at the situation objectively and can find it difficult to aid in resolving the issue.

Others have described empathy as sitting with someone while keeping healthy boundaries (Figure 1 right diagram; Stein, 1917 as cited in Kouprie & Visser, 2009). In "staying beside," both people are sitting in their own space yet from this position, the empathizer can understand the feelings of the other. The importance of maintaining healthy boundaries is also a core component of self-compassion so that we do not "get so lost in our roles" as educators that we stop taking care of ourselves (Neff, 2011b, p. 219). Yet, our boundaries are also softer and not to protect our egos but include a sense of seeing ourselves as being connected to one another in humanity (Neff, 2011a).

Better teacher/student relationships and overall better learning were the results of teachers practicing empathy (Boyer, 2010; Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). More openness and attunement towards those teaching across cultures are additional attributes of empathic teachers who are more effective in diverse settings (McAllister & Irvine, 2002).

While empathy is usually viewed as a positive quality, there are situations where it has negative consequences. When used to exclusively spotlight one side of a situation, empathy results in polarization (Breithaupt, 2018). Empathy can also be used to manipulate or control others. Many financial appeals use stories and photos to provoke empathy, and thus donations.

The common perception of empathy as being only positive has resulted in some replacing it with "compassion" (Bloom 2017). While empathy stresses sitting beside someone, it does not always move into action on this person's behalf. In other settings, self-compassion is preferred as it comprises taking action. Self-compassion involves three key aspects: "self-kindness versus self-judgment, feelings of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification" (Neff, 2011a, pg. 4). The practice of self-compassion reorients empathy internally and offers concrete steps of self-care.

Benefits from practicing self-compassion include greater ability in perspective-taking and more emotional stability and calmness (Neff, 2011b). These practitioners are less likely to compare themselves to others, or to get angry, as well as having greater emotional resilience and stability. Other benefits include being more goal-oriented in their academics and not as prone to exaggerate pain. There are even multiple health benefits as well including less depression, greater life-satisfaction, and improved

perspective-taking (Neff, 2011b). We will use the term self-compassion herein to include both of the perspective-taking part of empathy as well as the compassionate side.

Yet, for the educator to be authentic begins with self-compassion where educators have suspended judgement and shown kindness for themselves. In contrast, when the educator does not practice self-compassion, they may feel forced to act empathic and can be perceived as "faking it" or not being genuine. At worst, in pretending to show compassion to others the educator is communicating to others that this is acceptable. In times of stress authentic empathy, which stems from the practice of personal self-compassion, creates resilience and a greater capacity to manage the challenges of teaching.

Herein authentic empathy is defined as rooted in self-compassion, seeing things from another's perspective, and showing compassion which may lead to action on another's behalf. The practice of authentic empathy is important to support the individual in times of disequilibration by understanding and managing emotions, building resilience, and utilizing this practice to support perspective-taking.

Empathy and Transformative Learning

Times of disruption, such as a pandemic, are also windows of opportunity for transformation (Mezirow, 1981; 2000). Drawing upon Piaget's theory of cognitive development Mezirow saw TL as beginning with disequlibration. This occurs when one encounters new information or a situation which clashes with one's personal frame of reference (Driscoll, 2005; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). In seeking to make meaning of this new situation, one's perspective adapts and shifts, transforming into a new paradigm or way of thinking. Mezirow also saw the importance of empathy in "having an open mind, learning to listen empathically, 'bracketing' prejudgment, and seeking common ground" (2003, p. 60). Encountering a disorienting dilemma is the first step of TL—where we currently find ourselves with the pandemic. Thus, we have all been brought to the opportunity to engage in the transformative process.

Empathy has been added to core areas of TL which include critical reflection, dialogue, and experience (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). It supports TL by providing the motivating factors for active listening, the skill necessary for perspective-taking, understanding and awareness of what others are feeling, as well as the capacity and ability to show understanding (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). In short, it is "the ability to 'subjectively experience and share in another's psychological state or intrinsic feelings" (Morse et al., 1992, p. 274).

Empathy within TL has been studied using Synergic Inquiry (SI) to examine racial consciousness, (Kasl & Yorks, 2016). SI begins with self-knowing, or a form of self-reflection, also a key part of TL. The act of growing self-awareness offers space for the educator to take pause, identify the emotions they are feeling, and to try to determine their source. Yorks and Kasl conclude that "empathetic connection across such emotionally charged issues, especially in groups where members have very different and even opposing perspective requires capacity to both recognize one's own individualizing emotion reactions and adopt a participatory sense of feeling for the other" (2018, p. 592). Being aware of one's own feelings is an important part of connecting with someone else and their emotions across differences.

Empathy is not often mentioned as a critical aspect of TL (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Most often the focus is in two areas: how connections of empathy are created and maintained and empathy's role in outward perspective-taking by both educators and students. Studies in these areas primarily focus on the act of granting empathy.

Yet this does not go far enough.

We propose that embodying self-compassion both internally and toward others is important to the process of TL particularly in disequilibrium and perspective-taking.

Reorienting and Expanding Empathy

A prerequisite for fostering TL is for the teacher to enter into the transformative process personally (Cranton, 2001, 2006; Brookfield, 2017), and this same model can be applied in fostering the practice of self-compassion. Often, this first internal step of practicing self-compassion is bypassed by

moving quickly toward focusing on the other person. Rather, educators should first linger with their feelings by taking time to ground themselves, recognize their state of being, acknowledge their situation, and to offer themselves compassion. Self-compassion supports the educator during disequlibration and allows the educator to see themselves from a neutral position, a practice that will help in perspective-taking.

Practicing self-compassion supports the process of transformative learning in two specific ways. First of all, showing self-compassion is an important part of managing disequilibration. In times of COVID-19 more than ever self-compassion not only offers a good coping strategy, but also a way to build resilience (Neff, 2011a, 2011b). As the educator is attuned to their individual needs, engaged in reflection, this builds strength and health allowing the educator to be more empathic.

Developing self-compassion can also contribute to greater self-awareness. Increased self-reflection and self-awareness are part of becoming more authentic as educators (Cranton, 2001, 2006). This practice can also facilitate making an empathic space (Kasl & Yorks, 2016). Ettling (2012) proposes using contemplative attunement by listening carefully to oneself without distractions and thinking to recalibrate ourselves for listening better to others. TL theory assumes that a teacher is able to practice empathy; however, particularly during times of stress such as the current pandemic, it can be in short supply. Asking educators to provide empathy to their learners when they are not practicing it personally will look and sound hollow, a "fake-empathy."

Secondly, self-compassion is an important practice of growing in perspective-taking by engaging in self-reflection and mindfulness. When we start with self-compassion, we create the path to allow for healthy communication to occur (Barrett-Lennard,1997; Bohart & Greenberg, 1997). This begins by suspending judgment with ourselves and being open and honest to personal emotions. We observe our responses and see what we are feeling, why we are feeling it, and how we need to adjust in light of this to engage appropriately.

An important clarification needs to be made between self-compassion and self-esteem. This delineation is necessary as there is much concern with students' development. Self-esteem does not always yield the positive results as self-compassion does (Neff, 2011a). Many who are both prejudiced and/or narcissistic also have high levels of self-esteem (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Fein & Spencer, 1997). Self-esteem is attributed to the outcome of doing well, but not the cause of doing well Neff (2011a). Focusing on self-compassion can encompass the benefits of empathy without its potential weaknesses.

If students are to learn about and engage in self-care, it is essential for the educator to be a role model. While there has been greater interest in social-emotional learning in the classroom, this is aimed at what the teacher is producing and practicing outwardly and does not often include the personal social-emotional life of the teacher. As the educator cultivates self-compassion, they are able to also lead and guide their students in this practice.

The Empathic Educator

Inward Practice

When practicing empathy, the educator is acknowledging, considering and nurturing their inward life. Multiple practices can be engaged in to increase empathy but require time, thought, and intention. Efforts to bypass or take shortcuts by the teacher, due to their focus on the learner's needs, will impede this process. As the educator cultivates and practices self-compassion, they will also increase empathic practices toward the learners. During this pandemic, it is particularly critical for educators to practice self-empathy and self-compassion. Thus, we offer a selection of practices:

Self-reflection (emotions): What are the emotions that you feel in the classroom, at home, etc.? Anger toward students or frustration can result from what is inside you. Are you feeling overworked, overwhelmed or hopeless? If so, take some "me time"—what builds into you?

Negative feelings can show us where we have disconnected from our students (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

Self-reflection (thoughts): What are you thinking about? What type of self-talk are you engaging in? Are you operating from a negative or judgmental premise? Why do you think this is so? Is there a way for you to pivot toward the positive?

Self-assessment: Would your best friend treat you the way you are treating yourself? Would they be less judgmental and more forgiving? If your best friend was in your situation how would you treat them? Are you treating yourself worse than you would treat your friend? When you catch yourself engaging in negative criticism either about yourself or others, name it, reflect briefly on it, and then move away from it (Train & Niezink, 2019).

Reflective Journaling: As you are mentally self-reflecting, set aside time several times a week or even daily to record your emotions, your responses, and possible reasons for where these emotions came from. Re-reading these entries can help you to grow in self-awareness and to be more intentional and thoughtful in responses to your students.

Practice gratefulness: What makes you feel grateful? Part of your journal can also include writing down several things each day for which you are thankful. This action can help reframe negativity and has been linked to better health, stronger relationships to others, and building resilience.

Mindfulness activities: Are you paying attention to your breathing? Take 10 deep breaths. Both focused breathing and meditation are techniques that can help to ground yourself to stay in the moment and can also release anxiety.

Get outdoors: Take time to get outside in nature once a week. Go to a park or forest or find a walking trail. Take time to both hear and experience nature which can help improve your mood and focus as well as be beneficial towards better sleep and better mobility.

Exercise regularly: Are you doing any physical activity or regular exercise? A brisk 20-minute walk is one way to clear emotional overload and can even help with depression by increasing levels of serotonin, boosting one's mood while relieving stress and anxiety.

Outward Practice

Cultivating self-compassion is an important part in learning to practice empathy. This empathy is not forced or fake and allows the teacher to hold students to a high standard while offering deep compassion and support. In challenging times, such as COVID-19, with heightened levels of stress, relationship-building and maintenance require extra attention and effort. While not a new concept, the implementation of empathy is not intuitive. Using self—compassion as a starting point, all parties (educational stakeholders) can acknowledge each other's burdens and stress. Additional attention to the social-emotional dimension of learning can be the force that propels this crisis into a positive transformation (van Woerkom 2008, 2010).

When educators prioritize learners above themselves, a possible complication is an unbalanced teacher-student relationship where the teachers neglect their inner person and experience. Robertson (1999, 2018) proposes an educator-learner dyad—systemocentrism--where the needs of both are considered equally. Both "teachers and learners are fully human participants in interaction" (1999, p. 281). This allows the educator to care for themselves and care for their learners out of a position of true compassion.

A selection of practices to increase outward empathy and compassion follows:

Suspend judgment: When negative feelings about students arise, stop and deal with them personally. Name three reasons why the student could be acting this way? How could you see this in the best light possible? Ask the student questions such as: Is there something we can do to make this situation better? Why do you think you are doing this?

Listen actively: Is there a message underlying the student's conversation? Ask the student: Could you explain that to me again? Why do you think this happened? What is the most important thing to you in this situation?

Practice kindness. Greet and call on students by name. Uplift students—find a reason to praise them. Respond with positive comments first—this part was good, now let's look at this other section. Objectify negatives—couch negative things in neutral terms. For example, others have had problems here, let's see if we can look at it again. Replace "but" with "and" for example: I am glad you are in the class and your comment could have been said in a different way.

Maintain personal boundaries: "Stay beside" your student. Is letting down your personal boundaries going to help the situation, and your teaching, in the long term? Flexibility is necessary—consider offering re-takes of tests, input for viable solutions, appropriate extensions etc. There may be others who have more skills and training for this situation.

Exercising self-compassion gives educators the opportunity to internalize different methods and thought patterns to develop empathy. As with other activities, the more frequently this is employed, the more reflexive and easier it is to enact. The practice of self-compassion is a healing and regenerating time supporting the educator in times of crisis and building resilience (Neff, 2011a, 2011b). Self-compassion will not only improve the person of the educator but also their practice as they learn to consider the perspective of others.

Conclusion

"What's the most important lesson of pandemic life? I would argue that it's this: Self-care isn't selfish" (Parker-Pope, 2021). The year 2020 has been filled with suffering, chaos, uncertainty, and disequilibration especially for those in education. Yet, this time of disruption is also an opportunity for change and transformation. Educators need both support and space to cultivate and foster self-compassion. Educators who practice self-compassion have greater resources to empower and nurture those with whom they work.

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