Care as experiential pedagogy: Soil building in social work education

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In this conceptually-oriented paper, we propose *care as experiential pedagogy* as a tentative strategy to build a community of care in and beyond the social work classroom. Using a relational methodology that uses letter writing and text messaging to facilitate theory building, this article first thinks through our attempts to enact care as pedagogy in an academic and broader context often hostile to care. We discuss why care as experiential pedagogy is ever more important in the current neoliberal context. We talk about the politics of care and various conditions that make our care-centered pedagogy challenging, and we consider the groundwork and efforts required in order to make care pedagogy 'work'. We discuss particular strategies that we have engaged in to co-construct care-full classrooms with our students. We finally close with one possible example of how experiential learning can be deployed in the classroom to cultivate communities of care amongst students; one that is (literally) grounded in the metaphor of hot composting and soil building.

Keywords: *neoliberal academy; critical social work; experiential pedagogy; collective care; composting*

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Introduction

As social work scholars and educators, we are curious about how pedagogical approaches can be used in ways that not only teach about social work principles, but also enact them. In the social work practice context, care is central to what we do, yet our ability to perform and encourage this act in the classroom and education setting is severely compromised. Despite our genuine interests and intentions to facilitate transformative learning among our students, our teaching inevitably operates within a system that devalues care within ourselves and for each other. In this context, 'care', a seemingly straightforward practice and concept, becomes politicised. So, how do we practice care as pedagogy in our classroom?

Our commitment to care-centered pedagogy is informed by our bodies of intersecting privileges and marginality. These subject positions are central to the way that we enact care in the classroom. Chizuru is a migrant settler originally from rural Japan. She is a first-generation university graduate, who came to settle in Canada as an international student. She is a mother and primary caregiver of two young biracial and bicultural children, one of whom is neurodivergent. Her care work in the classroom is heavily shaped by her mothering role, the gendered expectations she grew up with in rural Japan, her experience of racialisation and minoritisation as English as a Second Language (ESL) in Canadian postsecondary institutions, and her social work experience with migrant communities. She occupies a privileged space of tenure-track professorship in the academic industry, though she consistently wonders about her belongingness in academia. This wondering often manifests in wanting to support students who similarly question their place in academic institutions. She is committed to walking alongside students, but struggles to set the boundary in her care work with minoritised students as she witnesses the failures of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives at postsecondary institutions.

Marisa is a white, cis, settler, who is also disabled and queer, parenting neurodivergent children, one who is also intellectually disabled and who has a lot of complex contact with medical systems (often referred to as a child with medical complexities). Her encounters with disability, collective care, and queer kinship (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 2022; Bradway & Freeman 2022) shape the way that she shows up as an educator, and the ways that she navigates access friction (Tsing 2004; Hamraie 2017) in the classroom. While Marisa foregrounds and centres care in her classroom, she tries to support students to build communities of care amongst themselves, rather than taking on all of the caring labour herself. This move is in part intentional; Marisa is a trained and experienced therapist and has built some professional capacities and boundaries to facilitate the building of caring relationships beyond herself. She is also a sessional faculty member, which places her precariously both inside and outside the academy. This precarious status shapes the way that she does care in the classroom. However, this perhaps more distanced work is also possible as a function of her whiteness; although she is a woman, as a white person she does not experience the same *demands to provide* care as some of her racialised colleagues (Spence 2021; Manango 2024).

This paper came out of our ongoing conversations about how to enact care in the classroom in sociopolitical conditions that devalues care. We met during the graduate program and remain to be each other's solidarity team (Reynolds 2011a) as we continue our work as social work educators. We are committed to supporting each other in the difficult moments of our work, and often exchange emails and texts when we encounter challenges.

In this act of care and solidarity, we noticed something was emerging theoretically and practically. This led to us using letter writing and text messaging as an emergent method to

bring the ideas contained in this paper together (Adams 2023; Mackinlay 2022; Flemming 2020; Stamper 2020). Because this paper thinks through care in the classroom, we wanted to use a method grounded in relationship, which we believe is fundamental to care. Combined with Richardson's encouragement to view 'writing itself as a mode of inquiry' (1994, 2002; cited in Adams 2023, p. 12, italics in original), we believe that this mode of inquiring together through letters and texts allows something creative to emerge. The letters and text messages we exchange are moments of witnessing how our co-conceptualisation is coming together; the moment when our theorisation is happening dyadically, and collectively in that we are bringing in other thinkers and beings to inform our theorising. While most writing and thinking together cannot be done divorced from relationship, this thinking through relationship can become obscured in the typical 'smoothing out' of relational process that academic writing normatively demands. We therefore render transparent our collaborative thinking when working through how we mobilise and cultivate care in our classrooms and with one another. Letters and text messages are delineated using italics. This move is a deliberate ethical practice in the context of academic norms that privilege professional performance and narrative smoothing. The selected segments of letters and texts are signposts of our developing ideas about care as experiential pedagogy.

While we were the only present conversational partners in the development of this article, our work is indebted to scholars in disability studies and disability justice, anti-colonial scholars, Mad scholars, activist scholars, social work scholars, and scholars of Asian American studies and Black studies. We also owe our theorising to care relations in our lives - our children, partners, students, mentors, communities and Mother Earth. While our intervention (and we) are located in social work pedagogy, with all of its tensions and possibilities, we hope that the ideas contained throughout will find resonance with educators and scholars in other disciplines.

Using these scholarly and positional entry points, this article first thinks through our attempts to enact care as pedagogy in an academic and broader context often hostile to care. We discuss why care as experiential pedagogy is ever more important in the current neoliberal context. We talk about the politics of care and various conditions that make our care-centered pedagogy challenging, and we consider the groundwork and efforts required in order to make care pedagogy 'work'. We discuss particular strategies that we have engaged in to co-construct care-full classrooms with our students. We finally close with one possible example of how experiential learning can be deployed in the classroom to cultivate communities of care amongst students; one that is (literally) grounded in the metaphor of hot composting and soil building.

The politics of care in social work and academia

We are both educators and scholars in social work. Our disciplinary and professional background, along with our own subject positions we shared in the introduction, inform the way we approach care in the classroom. For these reasons, we would like to first contextualise the relationship between care and social work. Care is central to what we do. We are invested in care of people and communities, and social work education is supposed to help and prepare students to do that work. However the care work in our profession has long co-existed with violence (Chapman & Withers 2019; David 2023; Rossiter, 2011). Care, when it operates within the dynamics of colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, capitalism, and white supremacy, can be, at best, patronising and at worst, violent. In the name of benevolence and care, we have actively been involved in the eugenics movement, colonial education, removing

children from their families (including but not limited to Sixties scoops, Millennial scoops[1]), forced institutionalisation, deportation, etc. (Blackstock 2020; Chapman & Withers 2019; Joseph 2015). Social work, particularly on Turtle Island (colonial name: North America), where we both live and teach, has both historically, and currently, deployed kindness and care for 'the unfortunate' by the 'benevolent' (often middle class white woman) and has been a key mechanism for driving the colonial, eugenic, and class surveillance work of the state (Chapman & Withers 2019; Joseph 2015; Margolin 1997). We therefore need to think very carefully about what practices are taken up as care, and for what purpose. Sometimes what gets understood as care is 'niceness', an enactment of the moral subject (Heron 2007) and white civility (Coleman 2016), which is often an impediment to care and justice. Chizuru, in her letter below, offers a discernment between care and niceness or 'fixing it' with students. 'Fixing it' is often individualised niceness and a performance of the moral subject (Heron, 2007), but perhaps not care as it does not challenge structural inequity in solidarity.

> *Dear Marisa,*
> *I've been thinking a lot about how care and caring manifest in our work as social work educators in the academy. I often reach out to you about how to support students, and I think I do it because I always wonder if I am doing it 'right'. Being trained in critical social work means that we deeply think about how seemingly innocent acts like care and caring can easily turn into trespassing, then harm (Rossiter 2001). I am afraid that my care for students may turn into that. Of course, it does not stop me from caring for students, but it does mean I need to pause and think about how I may understand and enact 'care'. You said before that fixing their problem is not the same as care, nor is feeling bad about not being able to fix their problem. I think you are right. I have to admit that when I encounter a student with needs, I tend to focus on their immediate and individual needs and try to amend the situation. This, of course, is not necessarily a bad thing and can be important, but I cannot stop there, nor is it sustainable. We are increasingly seeing a larger class size and students with high needs in the classroom. Yet, we do not have enough resources to support them. The growing needs in our class can no longer be about individual students nor the responsibility of individual instructors. How do we care for them and each other collectively and ethically? I would like to think more about this with you.*

In our classrooms, we encourage students to think and reflect on how care can become a site of oppression for people who do not fit in an ideal citizen subject. As social workers, we cannot escape this history or contemporary system that continues to reproduce violence as we enact care in our work. However, we are interested in a pedagogical approach that re-imagines care and intervenes in the violence that takes place in professionalised social work. We want our students to be aware of the danger of care that historically has operated to control, discipline and punish the population. We want our students to catch themselves when they become complicit. We want our students to enact care in a way that honours the agency and dignity of people and community in their work.

[1] In so-called Canada, the Sixties scoops and Millenial scoops refer to two periods of time when Indigenous children were removed en masse from their families into the child welfare system, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands. Overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare continues today.

To facilitate that learning, we need to model what the reimagined care can look like in practice. Yet, we often fail to enact the care that centres on the holistic and complex needs of our own or our students in the social work classroom. The neoliberalisation of universities prioritises productivity, efficiency and standardisation, where the pursuit of profit takes precedence over the pursuit of knowledge and the well-being of students and faculty (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg 2017; Morley 2023). The market-driven ideology has led to larger class sizes, reliance on sessional teaching, implementation of corporate mode in management and evaluation, overemphasis on employability as a measure of student success, and reliance on international students as income-generation capital. These structural and material conditions of the neoliberalised university are coupled with a growing obsession with Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) as their strategic direction (Grewal 2021). As Grewal rightly points out, EDI efforts have often focused on increasing representations from certain demographics in different roles without asking what happens after. In a neoliberal university, there is no place for genuine care for these bodies because it costs money, and quite honestly, it is inconvenient to implement meaningful structural support (e.g. if a neurodivergent faculty member needs more time to prepare for coursework or grade papers, is the university willing to hire a Teaching Assistant for them?). Faculty, staff and students who are traditionally excluded from the academy find themselves either struggling to exist (and pushed out), or leave the academy entirely because the system that we enter into is fundamentally unchanged despite the rhetoric of EDI.

Khúc (2024) talks candidly about how Asian American students suffer and die because of structural violence in postsecondary education. Drawing on Asian American Studies and disability justice, Khúc suggests that the conventional approach to mental health - treatment or increasing access to the treatment - is not the answer: 'the existing industry and scholarly understandings of mental health are part of the problem, and we need new frameworks to better identify and tend to our unwellness, together' (p. 5). Instead of medicalisation of mental illness, she invites us to think about how the structures produce Asian American unwellness and how to dismantle them. Though Khúc focuses specifically on Asian American students, this argument has relevance to other minoritised students who have been recruited into university industry as part of EDI project.

The structure of unwellness Khúc talks about is particularly important in social work education because, despite the emphasis on self-reflection, the ways in which 'we are differentially unwell' (p.21) and we are all in need of 'care' are not taken up meaningfully. The neoliberal ideology seeps its way into how social work is taught, where competency and marketability are prioritised over critical thinking (Macias 2015), which positions social workers as professional helpers, thus not the ones who are in need of care. In reality, many of our students and instructors occupy the positions of carer and cared for in and out of social work. In order for social workers to disrupt the professionalised and institutionalised understanding of care that have led to historical and contemporary harms, we need to re-imagine what care is and how to enact it differently. We propose that the classroom is the best place to begin its reimagining.

Situating care

> *Dear Chizuru,*
> *I keep coming to the screen to write this section and I falter. In part this is because I am having difficulty reckoning with taking up disability justice (Sins Invalid 2015) and healing justice (Page & Woodland 2023) in this context. These concepts are deeply rooted in movement work and I don't want to take*

> *them up casually, or appropriate them. This happens a lot, not only in institutions (although it happens there!) but I've also seen it in communities I'm involved with as a caregiver to my disabled kiddo with medical complexities. I've seen parents call themselves disability justice advocates, but without the necessary politic and commitment. Without the context. I'm just naming this wrestling - let's think together about it a bit more.*
>
> *I was also reading some of Jasbir Puar's (2017) work on debility and who can even claim disability and who is sacrificed/experiences debility through colonial, imperial, and genocidal projects... So I am just feeling uneasy in my attempts to write this up at the moment... also in the context of disability claims in our classrooms and my own etc…*

To take up care in the classroom, we draw upon multiple concepts from disability justice and healing justice activists and scholars (Khúc 2024; Piepena-Samarasinha 2018; 2022; Kaba 2021; Sins Invalid 2015). As Marisa discusses above, we do this work tentatively, as in institutions, both the university as institution and social work as institution, these concepts are often taken up cavalierly and divorced from context. So while we can say that our work is influenced and shaped by concepts emerging from disability justice, we do not call our work disability justice. Just as we hesitate to call our work decolonial, as decolonisation requires re-matriation of land, concrete action, and dismantling settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang 2012), we instead locate our work in an anti-colonial politics. Similarly, we locate our work in alignment with disability justice but do not call this work disability justice as such.

Drawing on disability justice however, we do commit to interdependence, self-determination and autonomy, collective access, collective responsibility, following the lead of those most impacted, anti-capitalism and anti-ableism, intersectionality, and healing and transformation in our classrooms (Sins Invalid 2015). We try to do this in deed and not only in word. These commitments, and the actions that flow from them, are essential in a context in which we are all unwell (Khúc 2024). We know that students are coming in from diverse contexts and experiences into the university classroom, where being a 'good student' often requires that they perform in ways often aligned with denying themselves as whole people. This performance is demanded of students differentially depending on social location (e.g. racialisation and white normativity). Students are often promised equitable environments on the surface ('Look at our commitment to EDI', 'Behold our support resources', 'See the shiny diverse faces on our literature'), without actual care.

> *Dear Marisa,*
> *People ask 'Why do you care so much?'. But I cannot help it. I cannot help but care because I see so much of me in the struggles that students face. University is not a kind place. Academia is not a caring place. University fails miserably in the care work of students. We/they get F-. It is particularly unkind and uncaring for people who are not meant to be in it. The universities say they are committed to EDI. The part of EDI is to include more traditionally-excluded bodies in academia, BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+, disabled, Mad, working class, single/sole parents… We applaud ourselves for diversifying students bodies. But this is performative care work. What we don't realise is that EDI efforts cannot stop at the door. It needs consistent care to make sure that they survive and thrive. We conveniently forget that they are whole people. They bring gifts as well as baggage. We don't get to just enjoy gifts. We need to*

> *honour their baggage too. This means that academic institutions need to be prepared to carry that baggage with them. Sure we have an accessibility office, wellness centre, counselling centre, and accommodation office, and they help students to a certain degree. But they are not enough. They are not enough because they still operate within neoliberal structure where efficiency and individualisation of problems take precedent. The care that addresses collective unwellness (Khúc 2024) is what we are lacking, and oftentimes the burden of caring and the baggage will fall on individual instructors or support staff who themselves are misfit to the norms of academia. The invisible labour, the nitty-gritty work of EDI, is carried out by the products of performative EDI. How ironic.*

Sometimes the baggage described by Chizuru above manifests in a misplaced loyalty to the institution, or a felt sense that we need to stay in harmful environments to protect others from that same environment (Ahmed 2017; Jaffe 2021). This personal and individualised sense of responsibility and care, while often deeply felt and genuine, often absolves systems of the responsibility of creating real structures of care.

> *Text message from Marisa to Chizuru: You might not get replaced. And also you can't absorb the failures of the institution.*

In our classrooms, as social work educators, we are not only responsible to care for our students, to meet them in their whole personhood, but we also believe that care itself can be an experiential pedagogy. The students we teach will emerge into the complicated and institutional profession we have described previously, and will be asked in these contexts to care. The way that we do care in our classrooms shapes the way that they may do care in their future work. In this way, the work we do in our classrooms must be aligned to the kinds of principles and actions we want them to take up as they enter their work. In the context of the historical and present violence of the profession, how do we want them to negotiate and navigate that context? We would argue that the experiential learning bound up in developing communities of care, and experiencing a kind of critical care in our classroom helps them to envision ways of being and acting in their work to build communities of care aligned with disability justice.

Care as experiential pedagogy

To situate care as experiential pedagogy, it is important to first contextualise how experiential education is taken up in social work education, to then discuss how we are mobilising the concept in this article. Put simply, experiential learning is learning by doing and learning through experience. Experiential learning theory is process oriented, taking students through a process of experience, analysis, experimentation, and reflection (Almeida & Mendes 2010; Roberson 2019). While experiential education can take many forms, probably the most recognisable in social work is field education, it can be found in many of our practices in the classroom including role play, writing and presenting policy briefs to a panel of classmates, and student organising catalysed in a community social work classroom that students take outside the classroom.

With this conceptualisation then, we posit that the act of developing communities of care amongst students, in the classroom, goes beyond the individual enactments of care by educators and students. When we consider care to be an experiential pedagogy, we intend that students

and educators co-create communities of care (experience), think about what they are doing together (analysis), engage in repair when ruptures arise (act experimentally), and finally reflect on the process alone and together. We believe that this way of working with students helps them to build capacity and practices to meet the conditions of social work, fully embedded in dynamics of social control, structural inequities, and structural abandonment, with courage and solidarity, even if their actions are inevitably insufficient and imperfect (Rossiter 2001; 2011). The correspondences below showcase the process of our collective conceptualisation of care as pedagogy and our use of gardens and composting as useful metaphors.

> *Dear Chizuru,*
> *I've been chewing on an idea from our previous conversations… While I know that you and I enact care practically in our classrooms, taking care to consider our students as whole people with a variety of access needs, and designing assignments, grading, and classroom activities to meet access needs (institutionally recognised or not) accordingly. This labour is, of course, important. But I also wonder about the ways that we have been in conversation about how to support the building of communities of care in our classroom. That is, not centering ourselves as the providers of care, the caregivers, the enactors of emotional labour, as the institution would demand of us. Rather, I am curious about how we support students to build communities of care in the classroom that can carry them forward. Isn't this also what we want them to do when they leave our classrooms? When they go out into practice? How do they find their people, and act in relationship with them towards justice? How do they care for each other and support each other in difficult times? We talk concretely about doing this work with clients, but what does it look like when we are holding each other up? I think sometimes when we talk about caring labour in the classroom, in the university, we might miss this piece; and I think this missing piece contributes to what we understand as burnout. Of course there are times when we need to concretely enact care with individual students. But the building, the catalysing, the cultivation of caring communities amongst our students, across difference is just as important, if not more so. You've described so beautifully in our conversations how you do this with groups of students in your class. I'd like to hear more about these interventions.*

> *Dear Marisa,*
> *Whoa, yes you are darn right. Thank you for reminding me that caring is not simply an individual act or responsibility, though it is often framed that way. What I have been noticing in academic institutions is how care is framed as collective responsibility, but still remains within the individual realm. So the counselling centre, the accommodations office, and the student wellness office saying that they don't have enough staff to respond to growing needs of students, and to address the gap, individual instructors and program staff are asked to support students in their capacity. They say they are empowering us to effectively care for students. They say student support does not just fall under the responsibility of the counselling office or wellness centre. We should all be supporting students. On one hand this makes sense, but on the other hand, it is another mechanism of neoliberalisation of academia. And I think individually I do a shitty job in caring for students. I never feel I have done enough, and of course I never will because as you say I cannot absorb the failures of the*

institution! So you are right, we need to be thinking about enacting and mobilising care differently. Community building as care. Holding each other up as care. Solidarity team as care.

What you say about the community of care in the classroom reminds me of the work I do in the garden. In the garden, you first need to set up really good soil. Sometimes soil is compacted due to excessive stress and stomping, and nothing can grow. To amend the condition, we need to feed nutrients in soil, and I love composting for that. The composting is magical. The wastes, things that we want to get rid of, can turn into something beautiful and so good for soil. The balance is the key - you need to put the right amount of nitrogen and carbons. You need moisture but not too much. You cannot add too much acidity because it kills bacteria that help the composting process. You need to turn the composting pile, but not too often because it needs to rest. You need to observe carefully with your visual, olfactory and tactile senses. Does it look like organic matters are breaking down? Does it smell bad? Does it contain too much water when you squeeze it? If things are not looking well, then we intervene. Maybe a bit too much water, maybe too much nitrogen. Maybe too much acidity. But with the right balance, good companies (e.g. red wigglers, potato bugs, microbes, fungi), and patience, it generates heat to decompose the waste into black gold. Our unwanted becomes nutrients for soil that care for other beings to survive and thrive. This even happens in the middle of winter!! It is so rewarding to see the heat coming out and active lives happening when it is dark and cold.

I wonder if our care work as social work educators is like that, to tend the foundation of a garden. Setting up the space for composting where students can come together, fostering good balance among each other through listening and sharing (without too much sourness), and turn their challenging experiences into nutrients that support others. This sure needs care and patience, but a different kind. It is the care work that is slow and underground but sustainable and far-reaching if it is done right. So we don't actually sow seeds or do growing for them, but rather simply setting up the ground where students can begin to enact care for themselves and others.

Dear Chizuru,
I've been a bit delinquent in writing back to you this week because I have been exhausted. There is so much happening and I'm feeling so much. And while the communities I live in are often good at caring for each other, I've noticed that with everything going on everyone around me is so depleted and have been for a long time.

Students, staff, and faculty at my university are organising a day-long sit-in for Nakba day this week. I've been watching with interested in, and in solidarity with, students and faculty internationally standing against genocide, and speaking up for a Free Palestine. I don't know what it will look like here - if it will go beyond the day, if structures of care will be organised around this action, but I have been impressed with the communities of care and structures of care built around encampments elsewhere. Taking care and making sure that people's nutrition, medical, spiritual, and safety needs are met, including those of children. I've heard of some encampments setting up libraries, prayer

areas, low scent areas, and healing circles. This is not unusual in movements, and it points to what kinds of worlds we want to build.

I was involved in organising childcare for a recent event in my community, and one of the childcare volunteers set up a wonderful watermelon activity for the kids - with a teaching about Palestine and signs that the children could carry at vigils and rallies. It was really beautiful, and a thoughtful way of integrating why we were there with the practical act of childcare.

I think that some of this relates to your compost metaphor in your previous letter. The reason people are coming together is not good; genocide, occupation, and war. A demand that universities divest from the structures that make these possible, especially corporations that fund the Israeli military, directly or indirectly. BUT what is emergent in the context of these important demands are provisional communities of solidarity. Communities that attend to the diverse needs of the people in that community. And these are communities reaching beyond themselves, coming together for communities beyond themselves in some cases. Quite beautiful. While I think that it is the responsibility of faculty to support and defend the students who are the catalysers of these actions, I also think it's up to us to follow the lead of students too. Perhaps we can take these lessons into our classrooms when thinking about cultivating the soil for communities of care.

Text message from Chizuru to Marisa: I cannot believe we are talking about composting but in a strange way I think it fits. So I have a story to share. I think I told you I am working on garden at my child's school. One of the parents was already involved in starting a pollinator garden so we decided to work together. One of the first things that needed to be done was to loosen the soil in the area where we plan to plant. The area is rock hard, like it is being stumped by kids that no grass or weed is growing. It seems like there was no life in it. So we decided to turn the dirt to loosen. It was really hard work, because some areas just don't budge, so much so that tools broke. But we made some progress, and the best part was that the soil was not dead after all because I began to find a lot of worms in one area!!! What we are going to do now is to put some compost in it, to get lives in there with help of microbes, then some top soil, then plan shallow rooted plants in the area that is really hard, but in the areas where we were able to dig deeper, plan deeper rooted plants. Then hopefully all of them work together to give more lives and nutrients back to the soil. And I was thinking about this experience in relation to our paper, that I think sometimes, the ground will be too hard to have conversations because it has been stumped on so many times over the history, but we could still try to put nutrients back in soil to loosen it and depend on other beings to support the ecology. And the soil is never really dead (like worms and microbes still exist).

Dear Chizuru,
I'm really appreciating your formulation of structural injustice and the related context as compacted soil. Deep transformative work requires more than the surface institutional work of EDI. We don't want students to perform the act of planting - to simply repeat back the language of anti-oppression without depth or attending to the complexities bound up in practice. We don't want them to

> *respond to difficult situations with statements that flatten out the complex relational, structural, and ethical intricacies of our work into soundbites. We want more than annuals that whither in the July heat; we want them to have frameworks that stand up to the challenges they will face in their work and lives going forward. For this, we need to build communities of care in the classroom where they can have the deep experiences and conversations that build capacity for justice-doing (Reynolds 2011b) and reckoning with quotidian harms (Sharpe 2017), as much as possible.*

To do this work of transformative learning (hooks 1994; 2003), we propose that care in the classroom must be more than a one-way relation, from the instructor to the student, or even from student to instructor, or students to each other. We propose that it must be bound up in experiential pedagogy.

Pedagogical interventions to actualise care as experiential pedagogy

If we are to build the growing conditions for care in our classroom, and catalyse the conditions of community care amongst our students, such work requires intentional starting practices. Building on the metaphor of gardening and composting, we propose an activity that builds on the common practice of developing community guidelines in the classroom. This is one example of many possibilities of enacting care as experiential pedagogy. While community guidelines, and ground rules for classroom discussions, can be important for developing classrooms that enable student participation, we wonder what more they can do. We find that, at times, community guidelines are developed and then fade into the background. We call upon them when there is a conflict that needs resolution, but they are not necessarily foregrounded in the ongoing discussions. Moreover, their development can at times be truncated; perhaps they are handed down by the instructor as 'rules of engagement' without any engaged effort by students. Or perhaps they can be perfunctory - just an exercise we do at the beginning of each semester, not dissimilar to ice-breaker activities - met with unenthusiastic partial engagement, and not a deep practice of community.

As previously discussed, social work has often been complicit in the perpetuation of structural injustice, colonialism, and genocide, often disguised as care and justice. As such, especially in social work classrooms, community guidelines need to centre on the structural violence that oppresses people with a shared understanding of justice principles and shared commitment to resisting injustice and inequality. Otherwise, the community guidelines, a set of agreed upon ground rules for important dialogue, may become another tool of control or sanction. We would want to be careful not to weaponise notions of civility against marginalised students who speak against violence and injustice (for more on this, see Bates 2019; Berenstain 2020).

Soil and the health of the soil operates metaphorically to help us to consider the conditions we are co-creating in the classroom with students. Good soil health is essential to have difficult conversations from which we can all grow, learn, and thrive; preparing the soil is essential if we want to have good growing conditions. And if we are going to support students to grow from their learning edges, they need a solid foundation that concurrently offers space from which they can grow. Moreover, for some of the very difficult conversations in social work, we need to prepare the conditions for discussion and experimentation. If we want students to feel able to make mistakes and be vulnerable with us and each other, we need to try to co-create a context in which this might be possible. Further, if we want them to carry these practices forward in their work in the field, and build relationships of solidarity that support them to do

this work for the long haul, then it is worth the effort to have them learn this experientially in the classroom. For this reason we propose the following process to develop community guidelines, in the format of a discussion guide to support facilitation of the process. Throughout the discussion guide, the steps of experiential learning theory are present: experience; analysis; experimental action; and reflection. These are woven throughout the process, in a way that scaffolds students thinking and practice of building communities of care in the classroom.

Discussion guide: Building the soil conditions for community care

Discussion prompt 1: What type of soil conditions do we work on? (Acknowledgement of structural violence and injustice and the need for collective care)

When we begin the garden, the first step is to assess the soil condition. If the soil is not healthy, the plants won't thrive or survive. Sometimes the soil is too compacted due to excessive stress and stomping. In compacted soil, its conditions become too hard for water and nutrients to seep through, causing poor health in the soil. Similarly, it is important to think about the soil condition of our learning before we begin the important work of collective care as we grapple with many social justice issues. Social workers work in contexts where the soil/ground is not particularly healthy; it is already harmed and unequal. Inside the classroom, the grounds we share are not equal either. Like compacted soil, the structural violence has hardened the ground that we share inside and outside the classroom. As Khúc (2024) reminds us, we are all differentially impacted by structural violence, who are, individually and collectively, in need of care. This acknowledgement is critical if our aim is to facilitate care as experiential pedagogy among differentially-positioned members of our community. With this line of thought, you are invited to think about individual and collective access needs in small groups. Individual students can share their access needs with group members for support, which then can turn into collective access needs that can be presented to instructors. The shift from 'I need…' to 'we need…' is a concrete way in which care needs are politicised without a sense of individualised burdens and guilt. It is also important to think about the tensions, capacity and limitations. How much are we willing and able to navigate together these imperfect and often harmful conditions? This discussion is not about addressing the structural conditions perfectly; it is about fostering capacity among students to develop provisional communities of collective care.

Discussion prompt 2: How do we feed the soil? (Respect for diverse contributions for collective care)

After we discuss existing soil conditions, we can think about the metaphor of composting as a way to amend the soil. Composting is a process of turning organic matter like food scraps into nutrient-rich fertiliser. Each element of organic matter interacts and plays its role to break down what we originally thought as 'waste' into something beneficial for the soil. There are different methods for composting, but for this activity, let us use the example of hot composting. Imagine for a second that our classroom is like a container of hot composting. Unlike cold composting, hot composting requires more management and care. There are some guidelines to follow in order for it to work. Just like composting, our classroom needs community guidelines to ensure that we are creating a caring environment for our unique contribution to become nutrients for the greater community.

To start hot composting, we need four key ingredients: nitrogen; carbon; air; and water. Each ingredient plays an important role in the composting process:

(1) Nitrogen (green) - protein source for the microorganisms = builder

(2) Carbon (brown) - energy source for microorganisms = mobiliser
(3) Air- keeping things moving = breather
(4) Water - when the air comes in, the moisture from the pile gets evaporated. Water is needed to continue digesting material

You are invited to think about how, for composting to work effectively, there needs to be a good balance among these ingredients. Then, each member is invited to choose an ingredient that speaks to them and shares their gifts and contributions. Think about how your gifts may translate into the classroom (e.g. air = 'I am good at being there for everyone'. 'I am good at breathing through the tension'). As members share, you may literally put organic matter into a bucket OR you can draw pictures collectively of what goes into the composting bin. Document the gifts and contributions each member brings and how they may get translated in the classroom setting.

This activity is designed to encourage you to think about how care is produced interdependently and everyone has a role to play in collective care. The unique gift each student brings to the classroom is acknowledged and students are encouraged to actively use it for collective care.

Discussion prompt 3: What to avoid in the composting pile (Commitment to justice and care principles)

Not all elements can go into the composting pile. Some items cannot be composted at all or will slow down the composting process or be hazardous (e.g. plastic materials cannot go back to the earth; meat, fish or oil rich organic matter will attract rodents; too much citrus will slow down the process of composting; chemicals or dog faeces are hazardous to soil and human health).

Similarly, in the classroom composting pile, it is important to think about what to avoid in the composting pile. Students are invited to come up with their own list of what to avoid in their classroom composting bin, identify why it should be avoided, and discuss the possible remedies/ interventions. This activity is intended to facilitate conversations about justice principles, tension management, and conflict resolution.

Discussion prompt 4: When and how to intervene in the composting process (Importance of process, intentional observation, and reflection for collective care)

The intention here is to facilitate conversations about care strategy. In order for hot composting to work, it needs to be cared for. You cannot leave it hoping that it will work out somehow. The pile needs observation and decision-making on when it should be turned and what should be added. You will need to do this using different senses - sight ('does it look like things are breaking down?'), touch ('it should feel spongy'), and smell ('it should smell earthy, not stinky'). The temperature of the compost pile should be monitored as well. If it is too hot, it may need turning or the addition of more carbon-rich materials. If it is too cold, it may need more nitrogen or more/less water.

Similarly in the classroom compost, we need to create a care strategy. In your group, you are invited to come up with check-in questions/activities that you wish to ask yourself each week regarding how care and caring are going in your group. The questions can be tentative, but they should be aimed at facilitating meaningful conversations that contribute to fostering nutrients in the group.

Concluding remarks

We wrote this paper as we heavily engaged in care work of our students, children, communities, and gardens. Letter writing and text exchanges allowed us to cross the imagined boundaries between personal, professional, and scholarly spheres and became practical and methodological platforms of relational, grounded, and engaged theorisation of care as experiential pedagogy. We focused on the politics of care in social work education, addressing neoliberal and colonial contexts in which care work is asked to operate.

We propose that in order to resist structural conditions that devalue care (i.e. neoliberalism) and appropriate care (i.e. social work), we must foster the social relations that honour interdependence, self-determination and autonomy, collective access, and collective responsibility. To reimagine care, we drew on disability studies and disability justice, anti-colonial scholars, Mad scholars, activist scholars, social work scholars, and scholars of Asian American studies and Black studies. We argue that care must go beyond individualised and institutionalised intervention; it must be grounded in the acknowledgement of structural violence and collective unwellness (Khúc 2024). Care as experiential pedagogy offers a conceptual framework and methods of teaching care by doing (experience, analysis, experimentation, and reflection). We used soil building and composting as metaphors and offered a discussion guide of community guidelines activity that considered conditions, needs, roles, boundaries, and strategies for building care in the classroom. Care as experiential pedagogy is a practice of prefigurative politics where students and instructors strive to create relationships that reflect what we teach in critical social work education, however imperfect that might be. The possibility exists not in perfection but rather in commitment. Our shared soil is surely compacted, but the lives continue to exist underground, and it is our collective responsibility to care for each other, together.

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