# Patterns of Practice

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*Authenticity*
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An International Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Patterns of Practice

**Aims**

Patterns of Practice: An International Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning iis a peer-reviewed open-access international journal jointly hosted by the School of Education and Communities and the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, University of East London.

Patterns of Practice is published twice a year (Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer) and offers an exploratory, rigorous, and creative space for informed debate, practice, and discussion on all aspects of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in higher education.

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**Submissions**

Patterns of Practice publishes twice yearly. To find out more about submission criteria and processes, please visit https://uel.ac.uk/our-research/patterns-practice/instructions-authors

**Enquiries**

General inquiries, questions and article submissions can be sent to the journal editors at: patternsofpractice@uel.ac.uk

# Contents

# Editorial: Grappling with Authenticity and Higher Education

In this, our first issue of Patterns of Practice, we have chosen to begin our journal's life by exploring the perception of authenticity in higher education (HE) in the collated contributions that follow. Rather than use this editorial space to review our general aims and aspirations for our new Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) journal and for SoTL in the UK as a whole, we have taken the opportunity, within the theme of 'authenticity', to provide a longer discussion of the aims and remit of the journal in our first article contribution, removing it from this brief editorial discussion.

We have chosen 'authenticity' as our first collated theme for this, our first Issue, as we feel that it is central to the project of SoTL as a whole. We see authenticity as key to the intentionality that 'good SoTL' exemplifies.

In putting together this journal, some essential questions emerged:

- What does it mean to be authentic?
- Why should it matter whether we become more authentic?
- What value does authentic teaching and learning practice have?
- How might authenticity inform and enhance the social practice of SoTL in HE, and consequently, the learning and development of students?

We are aware that while collating a themed SoTL response in this issue, authenticity means different things to different practitioners. As editors, we have been keen to encourage philosophical interpretations of authenticity that relate to social living and daily practice as well as the practical manifestations of authenticity in HE. We have been open to all manner of contributions that may even reclaim, subvert, or re-envision an understanding of an authenticity in HE.

**A summary of this issue's articles and updates**

The first two articles of this issue take us on an inward journey as practitioners and scholars of education centred on authentic being.

The first article is a discussion between us, the joint Editors-in-Chief, on the purpose of Patterns of Practice, which is to provide an exploratory, rigorous, and collaborative space for informed debate and discussion around SoTL in HE. We discuss the importance of SoTL as a deliberate and intentional process that involves inquiry, evidence gathering, and reflection to improve teaching and learning, framed as a mindset that combines scholarly teaching with research, and emphasising the importance of intentionality and reflexivity.

The journal's first issue focuses on authenticity, which is defined as presenting genuine and truthful perspectives in teaching and learning. Authenticity is linked to inclusivity, first-person inquiry, and the integration of personal and professional identities in teaching. We, the joint Editors-in-Chief, discuss our future aspirations for the journal and how we aim to foster inclusivity and collaboration.
In the next article, Olive Nabukera draws upon critical race theory and performativity to explore the concept of authenticity for Black educators, emphasising how racialised and gendered biases shape their experiences in the workplace and classroom. The author's narratives and analysis provide valuable insights into the intersection of race, gender, and teacher identity, illustrating how institutional non-performance perpetuates racialization and undermines authenticity. By addressing these issues, Nabukera advocates for more inclusive policies and practices that support Black educators, ensuring they can report incidents of racism without fear, and fostering a safe environment for their authentic selves.

The next two articles are both based on practitioner research centred on bridging gaps between theory and practice for authentic learning.

Erica Vaz Raposo highlights the effectiveness of practice-based role-play as a pedagogical tool in HE, particularly in business management education. The author's study demonstrates how role-play can bridge the gap between theory and practice, fostering student engagement, critical thinking, and employability skills such as communication, leadership, and teamwork. Ultimately, Vaz Raposo stresses the value of active learning environments in preparing students for real-world challenges, making education more authentic and aligned with professional demands.

Similarly, through action research, Sepideh Farokhmanesh asserts that in a business education context, authenticity manifests in

several interconnected dimensions, including from real-world business challenges, the formation of a professional identity, and authentic learning through coaching. Farokhmanesh suggests that business learning is best assessed through authentic assessment, offering students a genuine preparedness for their future careers.

For our updates, our authors have given us much to consider on policy, practice, and pedagogy in HE. Beginning with Earle Abrahamson, who highlights the multifaceted nature of engagement with SoTL, arguing that positionality (backgrounds, experiences, values, and professional identities), context (institutional culture, disciplinary norms, and educational practices), identity, cultural differences, and institutional support can hinder SoTL engagement. While forming collaborative networks can become exclusionary, the author argues that participation in communities of practice fosters collaboration and sharing of insights.

Our next update, focused on curriculum development at the University of Westminster. Mark Elliot, Hilde Stephansen, James Moran, and Lucy Gardner discuss their development of a suite of community-organising modules in partnership with Citizens UK, a major alliance focused on social justice. These modules follow a critical service-learning approach that combines classroom learning with real community engagement. The approach is innovative in structure, allowing students from different academic levels to collaborate on community projects. Beyond developing employable skills, the modules encourage students to reflect on their personal experiences and connect with others to create meaningful social change.

Spotlighting pedagogic choice, Ben Taylor offers a very interesting analysis of learning styles. He argues that while ‘learning styles’ as a comprehensive theory lacks empirical support, certain elements – such as personalised learning, flexible approaches, and metacognition – remain valuable for effective teaching. The author suggests that educators can still benefit from these principles when making pedagogic choices, even while rejecting the rigid categorisation of learners by learning style.

Susannah Pickering-Saqqa’s powerful reflective piece explores the author’s experience teaching a new undergraduate module titled ‘Becoming an activist at the University of East London’, at a point in time that coincided with an intensely turbulent period in Gaza. The author, who has personal connections with Gaza through

family and work experience, movingly examines the challenges of maintaining authenticity in teaching while experiencing vicarious trauma from the unfolding violence. In using the concept of sentipensar (integration of rationality and feelings), the author analyses her teaching experience through four dimensions of authenticity: being oneself, pedagogical relationships, contestation, and ultimate meaning. Pickering-Saqqa's reflection reveals tensions between institutional requirements, personal trauma, and academic freedom.

Finally, Kathryn Waddington, Justin Haroun, and Bryon Bonaparte advocate for more compassionate universities, emphasising intelligent compassion that leads to intelligent action and recognises suffering without reinforcing hierarchical power dynamics. The authors propose a practice-first approach that shifts from individualistic perspectives to collective understanding, weaving themes of belonging, caring, emotion, respect, kindness, and human relationships into a new HE policy narrative.

Waddington, Haroun, and Bonaparte end by questioning whether we are engaged in a battle for shaping the soul of HE, inviting readers to position themselves on the 'comrade to companion continuum of compassion' as we work toward universities that prioritise compassion over neoliberal factory models.

Bringing all our updates in this issue together, the authors focus their efforts on compassion, policy, and a practice-first approach. While our first issue may pose as many questions as it answers, we hope that this collection of personal and professional encounters in HE, that deliberate what it is to be authentic, inspires and intrigues our readers to consciously examine their own SoTL in the day-to-day.

**Expressions of our sincere gratitude**

We thank the contributors, reviewers, and the wider Editorial Board for their ideas, support, and expertise in developing our first issue. If SoTL is the application of scholarly mind and skill sets to allow the public scrutiny of research into teaching and learning, then we are very proud of this first issue.

Dr. Gabriella F. Buttarazzi
Dr. Warren Kidd
*Joint Editors-in-Chief on behalf of the wider Editorial Board*.

# Exploring Patterns of Practice: Reflecting on the purpose and ambition of a new international Scholarship of Teaching and Learning journal in the UK

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**Keywords:** *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), research-informed practice, values-based pedagogy.*

## Abstract

In this opening article for our first issue, *Patterns of Practice*'s joint Editors-in-Chief, Dr Gabriella Buttarazzi and Dr Warren Kidd, reflect together upon what it means to launch a new, open access, international Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) journal in the current Higher Education landscape. This article explores the aims and scope of the SoTL project as well as the intent for the journal and why patterns of practice, in a wider sense, are important for understanding a research-informed, values-based, and scholarly approach to learning and teaching, not just in the United Kingdom but globally.



## Introduction

*Patterns of Practice* is a new journal that sets out to be exploratory, rigorous, and creative, for informed debate, practice, and discussion on all aspects of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in Higher Education (HE). Our intention is to create a space that is collaborative in both intent and practice and as diverse as the field of SoTL itself. SoTL requires all parties involved in delivering teaching and learning (that is, ourselves, our colleagues from within our own institution, our wider Editorial

Board and International Advisory Group, and beyond, to authors and readers) to bring scholarly mindsets and skills to our teaching. In our view, SoTL is enacted by asking questions, gathering evidence of all forms, drawing conclusions, raising new questions, and ultimately, bringing what we discover through that process of inquiry to our students' learning. In this opening article, we lay out our intentions for the journal and how we should like it to proceed. In doing this, we reflect upon what SoTL means for us and why we consider it to be important for our institution, and for HE globally. We also consider its significance to our development as reflective and reflexive educators.

**Context**

In positioning the journal within the evolving SoTL academic space, we abide by Felton's five principles (2013), maintaining that SoTL is a rigorous and sustainable endeavour that:

1. is concerned with inquiry into student learning

2. is grounded in context

3. is methodologically sound

4. is conducted in partnership with students

5. is made appropriately public.

In this way, we intend *Patterns of Practice* to be an open-access and international peer-reviewed journal that supports the learning and teaching development of our institution while also seeking to extend debate beyond, and contribute to, scholarly activity within the field. After all, as McKinney (2007) points out, "SoTL can serve many positive functions for individuals, courses, programs, institutions, and HE, more broadly" (p. 23).

**Authenticity**

This first issue of the journal explores the theme of 'authenticity'. As we see it in relation to SoTL, this is the presentation of the genuine and truthful. Despite our positioning within Felton's (2013) model of SoTL, we feel it authentic that *Patterns of Practice* explores a wide and inclusive definition of SoTL within the boundaries of HE. For our purposes, SoTL practice must exist within HE at all levels; that is, outreach performed by HE providers, Access, HE in further

education (FE) and FE in HE. These contexts will be defined by the usual national and regional practices associated with how HE is structured and plays out across different national contexts.

While we welcome submissions on all current and pertinent aspects of teaching and learning, we are particularly interested in matters of inclusivity, authenticity, and twenty-first century readiness. However, beyond these matters, we seek to invite fresh perspectives to SoTL. Again, we see this as authentic to the aims and scope of the broader SoTL project – which is multidisciplinary and international in its reach – and work selected for publication should foster the development of praxis in HE. We also seek engagement from any practitioners who design, assess, and/or evaluate research methods and practices. Following Roth (2006), we appreciate a greater combination of authentic third-person and first-person modes of inquiry in HE, and stand by this view in the journal, including in this initial article from ourselves, hence the unusual structure of what follows.

**Implications for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

In exploring our motivations for developing this journal, and in the interests of ensuring that our authentic voices may be heard through this piece, we reflect upon the importance of SoTL to the current HE landscape. What follows is presented as a conversation between us, conducted, with gratitude, by a colleague on the Editorial Board.

**? Why did you want a new journal at UEL to enter the SoTL space?**

**Gabriella:** I've been interested in SoTL for quite a long time because I'm very passionate about education in general and that's the kind of research I do – educational research that explores the contemplative lives of scholars, teachers, and students. When I started my employment at UEL, I saw lots of practice going on – and it was great practice – but not always with the intention of formalising something or interrogating a particular idea. So, I think that SoTL has a deliberateness to it – it is about practically working towards a research outcome for the improvement of learning and teaching. In this way, insights are much more obvious and can be used later to inform teaching, learning and research again and again, so I think formalising practice is really good for all of us in an academic context.

The result of this formalisation is that academics and lecturers can bring it back into their work. They can keep developing it and they can also share it with others. So, I think that's what SoTL is all about. You need to be in an institution where staff have the desire to explore their practice and have that support and encouragement available. That is what we are trying to do.

**Warren:** I agree. In fact, listening to you speak, Shulman (2000) says that we improve our practice as critique becomes public. And so, I think there are elements of that in what you're saying, and what we're doing as joint Editors-in-Chief of this new journal.

I'm a teacher educator, and previously, I was involved in the education of new teachers in the FE sector. In that space, literature talks about having a dual identity. So teachers, as practitioners, have these twin intersecting aspects to their professional identity; they have an original 'field' identity – you might be an experienced bricklayer, or you might have been an architect, or you might have a degree in maths – but then you have this other, second identity, which is your teacher identity. This 'teacher identity' can be framed as a teaching subject identity. The trick is to get the two identities talking to each other in terms of your continuous professional formation. It feels to me that in HE, that's the same for us.

For a while now, I've been looking for a means by which we might really emphasise this commitment our identities have to teaching and learning in a kind of public, communal, developmental way. This journal seems to be that opportunity.

As a teacher educator, SoTL has somewhat taken me by surprise. What I mean by that is that I think in teacher education we talk about a wide range of practices but without often denoting these as 'SoTL'. For example, teacher education explores learning and teaching, the schools sector, the nature of professional learning, new teacher development, and the nature of placement-based learning but actually, in England – and I think in aspects of the wider UK – the idea of SoTL is not yet as well-known as it is in other places, namely Australasia, and/or North America.

I am very conscious, though, that SoTL requires intentionality, so, if you don't have the deliberate intent of SoTL, can it be SoTL? By default, if the intent of SoTL isn't there, then we need to tease it out. And that's my aim for doing this work – that is, I want the authentic intent to be there in a fully realised way.

**Gabriella:** I love that. I definitely think that it can't be SoTL without intentionality. You look at practice differently when you have intentionality. I do see some educators who have the urge to make changes to their teaching retroactively – when staff realise 'oh, something worked here, or something was quite surprising'. But of course, if you've not brought that intentionality from the start, then you probably missed opportunities as you went along, and it's generally not what we would encourage with research anyway. But yes, I love that. I think that is true – the importance of the intentionality element (or component) of SoTL.

The idea about dual identity is interesting because my feeling is when people work in a professional field they bring rich knowledge with them. For example, you are a physiotherapist and you're now working in HE – you now have a remit to teach and train early career physiotherapists. You're pretty confident with that discipline, with that area of practice, but after working in that field – and now, developing your teaching – you realise that there's a lot to learn. However, what you have to learn ends up being reduced to teaching and learning strategies or 'tips' to try. But there's a lot more to it. There's a lot more than people initially realise. I think that engagement in SoTL can really help to support colleagues in HE as they make this transition from their previous professional field to the new field of teaching. In this way, we can support colleagues to be both educators and subject specialists.

**Warren:** Yes, I agree. It's not an 'either/or', is it? It's not a dualism. It's some kind of complex connectedness of the two.

**? Why is the journal's title *Patterns of Practice*? What are you saying by this?**

**Gabriella:** Well, I think the word 'practice' is key, but when we were talking about SoTL, we are talking about different approaches to educational research. Generally speaking, in HE, there's been a dominance of third-person perspectives. And that type of scientific rigour and empirical analysis is important, of course, but there's been less emphasis on first-person approaches. Although, that has changed in recent years, I would say, and there's been a real interest in inquiry and reflection across HE disciplines. Then there are also other approaches, second-person approaches, where you bring in other people's perspectives. So, we especially invite scholarship from all practitioners who design, adopt, assess, evaluate, and research either first-person or a combination of first-, second-, and third-person inquiry, methods, and practices. In his

wonderful paper, ‘Contemplative studies: Prospects for a new field’, Roth (2006) calls for a greater combination of third-person and first-person modes of inquiry in HE. Though that paper was written in 2006, his words are still relevant today. Here’s an extract:

> Our scientific knowledge of how the world works has never been stronger, but our ability to use it to transform our lives to create greater personal and social harmony remains relatively weak. We can use our technology of the outer world to treat previously incurable diseases, but our mastery of the ‘‘technology’’ of the inner world is so rudimentary that we can barely contain the passions that lead us to destroy the very human life that we, paradoxically, struggle so hard to preserve. We have become the masters of third-person scientific investigation, but we are mere novices in the art of critical first-person scientific investigation. We have never known more about how the mind works, yet our ability to apply this knowledge to our own experience has not been correspondingly developed (p. 1787).

I feel that one of the reasons for the paradoxical situation that HE institutions are facing is that there has been a failure to combine the careful, systematic, and scientific investigation of contemplative experience from a combined third- and first-person perspective. HE pedagogy and curriculum are currently dominated by third-person inquiry: observation, analysis, recording, and discussion on a whole variety of subjects held at arm’s length, as a priori, ‘as if they were solely objects and our own subjectivity in viewing them does not exist’ (p. 1790). So, I think the idea of *Patterns of Practice* is that there are different layers, different ways of seeing and exploring teaching and learning.

Brookfield (2015) has written about the different lenses to help educators consider aspects of academic practice from different perspectives. In this, we can see there are different patterns based upon different viewpoints. So, there’s the lens of the students… How do they see what their educator does? What meanings do students make of educators’ decisions? How do they experience their education? How do they experience the dynamic in the classroom? …and so on. Then, you’ve got the lens of the colleagues’ perceptions. This is quite a common lens in educational research, I would say, doing interviews where you’re asking about teachers’ perceptions of an element of practice, for example.

Another useful lens: asking colleagues for feedback (for example, what's going well, what's not, what am I missing, what do you think is going on here?), this works very well at the level of course teams, programme teams, module teams, sometimes when you work together, sometimes co-teaching. And we can see that co-teaching leads us to learning together and to adopt different practices.

Then there's the lens of theory, which, I'd say overall, has been rather dominant, so educators refer to theory to open up to alternative explanations and interpretations of what they are doing. So, for many lecturers, their starting point is an educational – or other – theory. And then there's the autoethnographic or autobiographical, and that's another lens. I'm, personally, very interested in that because it usually gives me a completely fresh perspective when I read people's work about their personal experiences – but they're all valuable.

I think, in this journal, thinking about the patterns, we want to encourage that kind of thinking using those different lenses, looking at different ways to see it and writing in a different style, even if that is something you're uncomfortable with as a practitioner or author. I know, for example, that not everybody is comfortable with first-person inquiry, but it is just fascinating to read because they know that domain inside out. And speaking of inquiry methods for SoTL, without wishing to oversimplify, a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, that is, a mix of inquiry methods – can offer a richer picture of student learning for advancing teaching in HE. Hutchings (2000) highlights the power of methodological conversation and collaboration across fields of study as faculty borrow approaches and perspectives from faculty in other areas. I have a nice quote here,

Developing a broader, more sophisticated repertoire of methods is clearly one of the challenges facing this work, and a necessary step in advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning as a field (Hutchings, 2000, p. 7).

So, in addition to common methods in education research, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, or surveys and focus groups, SoTL inquiry methods might include (but, of course are not limited to) case studies, think-alouds, ethnographies and auto-ethnographies, experiments and quasi-experiments, as well as discourse, textual or content analysis of all manner of teaching and learning work by faculty or students offering rich, first-person

insights from journals, reflections, and portfolios, for example.

So, learning about others' practice and our own practice, you come to know more about the inner experiences, very interesting. I suppose that's what we mean by patterns. And then, of course, recognising that practice is living – constantly moving, constantly going, and always evolving.

**Warren:** Thanks. I want to pick up on that idea of moving or movement itself. We are focused on practice and everything around it – scholarship, research, investigation outcomes. But actually, SoTL is a field, and also a 'movement', isn't it? Going back to its origins, thinking about, say, Huber and Hutchins (2005), we have the idea of SoTL as a 'Big Tent' – as an umbrella within which other things fit. Recognising critiques of this as SoTL changes over time, but nonetheless, if SoTL is a movement, then movements have patterns, don't they? As they move, they leave patterns behind, which are sometimes not visible until the act of looking back. But sometimes, they have future patterns where interests, fashions, fads, new ideas, approaches come to fruition, often through communal working and public sharing. So, just thinking here – if SoTL is a movement, then *Patterns of Practice* seemed an appropriate title.

Boyer (1990) says that there are there are four overlapping types of scholarship that the academy can/must – or perhaps, does – adopt: there's the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of application, the scholarship of integration, but obviously, also for our purposes, the scholarship of teaching and learning. So, we have, in SoTL, that idea of it being a scholarly activity, which is, itself, a field and/or a movement, leaving in its wake patterns of inquiry, and perhaps, pointing to the future, showing productive patterns for new writers/ experienced authors/first-time explorers of this space. It seemed a nice little turn of phrase and perhaps a helpful metaphor.

**? How will the journal be themed and why have you done this?**

**Warren:** OK, so I think we wanted something that was perhaps a little bit playful. I'm loath to use the words a 'little bit creative' because I think we overuse and incorrectly use that term, yet I do think, actually, we are trying to be, somehow, creative. I think we're also trying to create something that's a slightly distinct product. Or maybe, that each issue is a distinctive product in some way. We recognise that it gives something that the editorial of the

issue can use to pull themes together, and then can talk about in a knowledgeable, involved way. I think this is important – it gives due recognition to the colleagues who have made contributions by trying to tie them together; to see the contributions not as solely separate pieces. Pieces, again, recognising those 'patterns of practice' that we've been talking about.

**Gabriella:** It can really encourage people to see their work differently. So, in our first issue, on 'Authenticity in Higher Education' – this issue – it's obviously such a broad term to use. Yet, we feel that when you've got a starting point like that, as an author, you might think about how or what 'authenticity means to me' and explore how you have applied, engaged in, or embodied it in your practice, or reflect upon how you see it in your practice. I think it can inspire an alternative way to see your own work as well.

**Warren:** Yes – you begin to think about what you do and what patterns might exist or lie behind it. But in terms of theming the journal, there's also a pragmatic reason, isn't there? Because if we'd had an issue on assessment, or if we'd had an issue on student voice, you know, both terribly important things, but, actually, if we had that issue, how long do we leave it before we revisit that? It would then preclude others writing about such important issues 'until the next time', thus precluding people from making valuable, interesting, useful submissions.

So, we decided to remove the more 'obvious' themes, and not, say, have a theme that's about assessment, or not have a theme that's about student voice, but have these other types of themes. I think, in this way, we can support more submissions, looking at it in a purely pragmatic way, recognising that this is a new journal in the SoTL space, but at the same time, as editors, we can still play with that notion of patterns, which are, as the name suggests, at the very heart of the journal.

**Gabriella:** That's a really important point because when we were looking at this from the start and thinking about our Calls for Papers and how we go about it, we didn't want to exclude anyone from the conversation. We wanted to be as open as possible and welcome as many different ideas as possible. And of course, if you do theme things according to some of the sector priorities like, for example, assessment and so on, then as valuable as these are, you really do start excluding people from even entertaining submitting something. So yes, that's a really important point.

**? What do you think, as editors, makes a good SoTL article?**

**Gabriella:** I like to see things (topics?) that are quite 'brave'. Let me explain this. There can be a lot of research that is perfectly valid, that outlines the findings of a study, or proposes recommendations, conclusions and uses very familiar literature – and these are clearly good, robust pieces of work to be valued – but I would also like to see something that is a little bit braver than that because, as a writer and an academic, if you're talking about your practice, there is going to be an element of vulnerability that will come out. You know you're not writing anonymously, therefore, your writing becomes, by default, an insight into the inner world of your teaching practice. So therefore, I would say that something a little bit brave would be a very, very valuable contribution. That kind of bravery actually does influence others – peers and stakeholders – because you're showing people there's another way you can do learning and teaching work and push at boundaries at the same time.

**Warren:** I like that. We have to recognise, that teaching itself is a quasi-public experience – it's not fully public though, because it's a closed environment; it's a room where only some people inhabit and some other people would be deemed to be not able to attend, depending upon the modules, courses, lectures, seminars, lessons, workshops. But there, in that moment, once the space is inhabited, it is definitely social and relational. Therefore, there is some aspect in which you're displaying yourself 'out loud'. I think, when you're new to teaching, there is an uncomfortableness and a disruption, there's something unsettling about putting yourself in that social context.

As for then writing about it, putting your practice into writing, you're right – the same applies, doesn't it? You're putting yourself out there for scrutiny. And so, therefore, there is a public display of self, and if SoTL requires reflexivity, then, along with reflection and reflexivity, there is a bravery associated with that. I like that, I think.

I think that if we see SoTL as an approach, it is certainly a varied one, or at least, a combination of approaches. While we can identify good practice and underlying principles (Felton, 2013), we still recognise that it is inevitably made up of many different, nuanced ways of thinking. In fact, this is one of its principles of good practice, or at least, hallmarks of its qualities. This means there isn't one answer to our question 'what makes a good contribution?', because SoTL, itself, is varied. It depends, perhaps,

on the nature and purpose of that type of SoTL contribution, but, at the same time, we do want something that is inclusive, we want something that is robust. We want something that is up to date. We're also interested in theoretical, pragmatic, reflective, researched contributions, which, I think, are the things that make something scholarly in the first place.

Yeo *et al.*'s (2024) book on SoTL research methodologies reminds us that the debate around SoTL is not necessarily the same as scholarly teaching per se, which might be something else which I quite liked. So, we want articles that are the scholarship of teaching and learning. But Yeo and colleagues also say that SoTL is not necessarily the same as Discipline Based Educational Research (DBER) and the possible adoption of 'signature pedagogies' (Shulman, 2005). So, SoTL contributions need to have these potentially elusive qualities of 'SoTL' about them, recognising the subject field they come from, the research skills of the HE practitioner, but always focused upon exploring, elaborating, and developing teaching and learning through this very 'scholarly approach'.

What this all means for me in my mind, the idea of SoTL being a mindset, means that it has to address Hutchins' (2000) taxonomy of four heuristic questions. It has to: look at what works, look at what is, have a vision of the possible, and also, have some attempt at theory building – with either a capital T or a small T – building new conceptual understanding. And I think that's what we're ultimately looking for as editors of this journal.

### ? What is the difference between the two different types of submissions that the journal will accept?

**Gabriella:** We have two types. First, we have what we are calling the 'full article' submissions. These might bear more similarity to things that colleagues might have submitted in the past. These pieces are more 'traditional' in that they meet our usual expectations of a journal article, that is have: an introduction, a base in theoretical knowledge or literature – perhaps as a starting point, and a review of practice and its implications. But we want a journal where each contribution ties back to the 'theme' of the issue while also recognising that SoTL is itself broad and, therefore, this means there are so many kinds of submission that authors might wish to make within the template, format, and guidelines we offer as editors.

These ‘full article’ submissions largely follow a recognised structure. It’s certainly the appropriate length for doing a piece of writing like that, but it doesn’t have to be a piece of primary research, of course. And we explicitly ask authors to really think about how they position their work as SoTL, and also, how they meet the chosen theme.

We think this will really reveal some very interesting perspectives because we suspect that they’ll be very varied across submissions. Ultimately, as well as reviewing practice in a scholarly way, we need to ask ourselves, over time, thinking about each issue, how does this advance SoTL itself? And we think that’s quite an important way to really ground this work.

In developing the SoTL as a field, we also wanted space in the second half of each issue for what we call ‘short update’ submissions. Of course, they are shorter, as you can imagine, and they don’t follow the same, more traditional structure with an abstract and keywords and so on. They will be, perhaps, more varied and they can be much broader. They might be a good starting point if authors, for example, have the ideas for a future project or a future area they want to investigate and they’re in the preliminary stages. They might want to put out an update on that, or maybe preliminary findings of some sort. The ‘short update’ submissions are to help authors explore the kind of scholarship they’ve been engaging in. We imagine that, as they are quite short, it would be difficult to outline primary research, but who knows? We are very open to seeing different kinds of short contributions. They’re quite flexible, which we think is also in a SoTL spirit or mindset.

**Warren:** Yes, they could be an update or even an opinion piece, couldn’t they? I like the idea that if SoTL is both a field and a movement, and if we’re trying to capture the patterns of the practice of practitioners who might be allied to that movement, then I like the idea of providing, like you say, a space for shorter pieces, reflective pieces. I’m also very conscious of, sometimes, the need for ‘just-in-time’ and ‘rapid response’ submissions. I have a feeling that one of the reasons for the popularity of short publications, such as things like research blogs, is because they provide both experienced and first-time authors (academics, practitioners, researchers) a space in which they can articulate something clearly, cleanly, but also, quickly. It does provide a vehicle in which there’s a rapidness in making public and communal one’s work. Now, obviously, we, as a journal, can’t respond as quickly as a blog

or a website can, yet, within the confines of a traditional journal structure, I like the fact that we're, at least, trying to do something a little bit different, something that's not the usual writing experience, while still valuing that as well.

**Gabriella:** And they have been rather popular – the 'short update' submissions so far.

**Warren:** Yes, as we can see from this this issue, at this time, we already know what the submissions are that have come in and what the reviewers have made of those submissions. We can already see that there is, I think, a real value and merit in having that kind of shorter piece.

**? What do you mean by a research-informed and a values-informed approach to SoTL?**

**Gabriella:** Thinking about a research-informed SoTL takes us back to the lenses we were talking about earlier; they're all forms of research. We value colleagues who are engaging in first-person approaches such as you see in an auto-ethnography. These pieces are grounded in practice, experience, process, reflection, action, and literature. There's a literature behind it all; true for SoTL as it is for all other fields.

To think about being values-informed, then I think that you'd have to believe in the importance of teaching and learning to even submit anything to a SoTL journal, or to engage in SoTL. And so, I think that 'value' comes through in most SoTL work. As a reader of SoTL pieces written by others, I think it is valuable to know the perspectives of the author. You know that their values – what they value in education – are their underpinning drivers. And then of course, you can see that come through in the work and I actively encourage that to come through in the work they submit to us. I think all SoTL is essentially a thinly veiled autobiography anyway, because we would never choose a topic if we didn't have a yearning relationship to it.

**Warren:** I think we could make that claim stronger: we could say that that the act of wishing to engage in something in a scholarly way is, itself, attributing to it an importance and, therefore, a value which means that you, as the practitioner or author, are valuing it. You are making a deliberate and considered decision to present it, expose it, or open it to public and/or communal scrutiny. This is essential to any activity being a 'scholarly' activity, at least in the

contemporary world. So, I think you're right – scholarship itself, of anything, is about a values-informed position.

**Gabriella:** And it's really interesting to see people who do actively engage in SoTL, to see the progression of their work, the body of work that, as they go through their career, being created. You really get a sense of who they are as individuals.

**Warren:** In terms of SoTL contributions being research-informed, then this might look different, depending upon the subject field, the practice, the approach, but at the end of the day, we want something systematic, rigorous, robust, but we also recognise that what those things might look like might vary based on the type of submission an author wishes to write, but also the type of practice they are they are doing. For example, reflexivity might look different from a more quasi-experimental design, where there's quantitative data that might support the adoption of one type of practice over another. So, how those things get written up look different. Nonetheless, we would encourage work to be a step-by-step process with awareness given to its scrutiny, collegiality, and rigour, reviewed with some connectedness to existing research.

We are looking for something that is systematic but also, recognising that submissions might feel and look slightly different from each other, because that's the nature of what we're trying to embrace, to be as inclusive as possible in this space, because if SoTL is a mindset, it certainly isn't a one-size-fits-all.

**Gabriella:** No, absolutely not. And we're expecting that from the varied nature of submissions: we can learn from each other that way as well. We are working on the assumption that those who teach in HE – experienced or new to teaching itself – still, nonetheless, bring a wealth of other knowledge, cultures, contexts, and experiences. And therefore, it is likely that they are bringing all of that into their own SoTL. That might be a shift for some people, but we think the value of SoTL is it helps support that shift to SoTL as a new field for all practitioners in HE.

**Warren:** …which, again, goes back to that idea that SoTL is not necessarily exclusively, or solely, scholarly teaching, but there is still a scholarship there. And it's also very much not a dual-identity and not an either/or identity – between subject and teaching – but instead, the two must be combined. Our work in HE must be – or at least, become – a hybrid of one's field, one's practice, one's interests, one's mindset, bringing those things together.

**? What are your hopes for the journal as it progresses into the future?**

**Gabriella:** I would hope that it builds and even reconstructs and recreates. On a practical level, we would like to receive high-quality submissions that come from all over the place and as such, we'd like it to be as reflective of changes in the HE landscape, as this also reveals new pathways, all from different academics, internationally. We'd like to see that openness coming through in every issue.

Eventually, there is the hope that the journal builds a community of practice and encourages others to have an interest in the field of SoTL as well.

**Warren:** The journal is deliberately both internal and external looking, looking out to both national and then wider global practices and potential audiences and authors. Given this, our aspirations for the journal are twofold: we wish that we, as an organisation, can showcase our work and equally, can benefit from others who are willing to share in this public domain. The collective goal of SoTL is that we all can improve our practice through public scrutiny and critique.

I think, humbly, we're looking to make an impact on SoTL in the UK and also to learn from those already engaged in SoTL work. We would like the journal to be active in demonstrating the fact that there are extremely productive pockets, or patterns, of practice that already exist. And we would wish, eventually, to sit alongside those practices, showcasing experienced authors, new authors, but also, maybe, reach new audiences who, perhaps, aren't yet aware of SoTL.

We have multiple aspirations, as we work through this first issue and then establish a new journal longer-term, but always with a view that we produce a good product, providing opportunities for colleagues, providing a journal that is interesting, unique, a good read –something that others can value and learn from.

**Gabriella:** And that is why we have adopted the varied submissions approach, and also, greatly value the diversity of contribution. It is why we have made the journal open access.

## Conclusion

In this first issue, as joint Editors-in-Chief, we thought it would be an interesting and authentic first submission for our first issue to have taken the opportunity to share a dialogue between ourselves. In this, we have unpacked the aspirations we hold, the way we see SoTL, why we are creating this journal in the first place, and showcase a conversation between ourselves as colleagues. Getting to this point – the first issue – is the culmination of a range of conversations over an 18-month period. It is also the result of collaboration between a broad collection of people including the wider editorial team, the Editorial Board, and colleagues at UEL who support the website, our repository, the library, etcetera. Our practice and our identities as educators are enriched by these conversations – in this sense, they are part of the SoTL 'mindset'.

We wanted a space – not simply the usual editorial – where we can reflect upon our intentionality: what we're doing, why we're doing it, how we're doing it. To begin to explore what that might mean moving forward. Conscious that our first issue is about authenticity, and in keeping with this, we felt it would be appropriate to reflect upon the authenticity of it as a journal in the SoTL space in the very first place.

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# Teaching while Black: navigating performativity and authenticity

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**Keywords:** *Black female academics, Higher Education, teacher identity, authenticity, racialisation, performativity.*

## Abstract

Diverse faculty recruitment has become one of the ways through which universities in the Global North perform anti-racism, often framed within broader equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives. However, Black female academics continue to experience racism, tokenism, and systemic inequities, contributing to psychological distress and high turnover within the academy. This paper utilises the theories of Critical Race and Performativity to investigate the concept of authenticity for Black instructors teaching 'English for academic purposes' in higher education. Through autobiographical counter-narratives of classroom incidents in two institutions in the United States, this paper examines how a teacher's race and gender shape their experiences in the workplace when racially charged incidents occur. It also highlights the role of institutional non-performance and impact on teacher authenticity, advocating for a more inclusive conceptualisation of authenticity.



## Introduction

Higher education (HE) in the West has seen an upsurge in efforts towards anti-racism and decolonisation (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2022, 2020; Doharty *et al.* 2021). In the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), institutional commitment towards equity, diversity, and inclusion have taken on various initiatives including the hiring of faculty from minority backgrounds (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018, 2016; Rodgers and Liera, 2023). However, despite

institutional inclusive reforms, faculty of colour who embody the diversity universities claim to value continue to report overt racism, tokenism, microaggressions, bullying, and harassment, as well as mental and psychological stress within their work environments (Mahony and Weiner, 2019; Rollock, 2018, 2019; Settles et al., 2020; Showunmi, 2023). The weight of embodied diversity and racialisation has led to high turnover rates for Black female academics (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Bryan *et al.*, 2022; Bhopal and Chapman, 2018; Showunmi, 2023; Stockfelt, 2018). For those who choose to remain, discussions on authenticity remain under-researched, particularly for those who teach English at HE.

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse of Black female academics while advancing it through the theory of performativity. Drawing from personal accounts of classroom incidents that took place in the US, this article examines how racialised incidents are reinforced or challenged in the workplace from the perspective of a Black female academic, inevitably shaping the boundaries of teacher authenticity.

**Positionality**

Although this article is grounded in a few theoretical frameworks and analytical discussions, it is autobiographical – hence the use of the first-person pronoun, 'I', in the sections that follow the literature. As a Black African whose teaching career has been, primarily, shaped in predominantly White institutions in the US and the UK, I have quietly endured microaggressions, othering, invisibility, and misrecognitions in various academic spaces. My understanding of race, gender, and Blackness has evolved as result of significant time spent in the US as a student, a university lecturer, an immigrant, and a citizen. I gained firsthand experience of not only racial dynamics, but also, the societal perceptions implicit in those identities. As such, my doctoral research examined the racial and linguistic positioning of Black teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in the US through the lenses of critical theory and positioning theory (Nabukeera, 2020). My scholarly work, since then, has built on those findings with current research and scholarship focussing on decolonial ideologies and Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies embedded in the field of English for academic purposes (EAP), in which I teach. Despite this work, I have seldom had the opportunity to directly confront, challenge, or make space for personal reflection on my lived experiences. This paper is an attempt to give voice to those unspoken realities. And while the narratives presented are not intended to

be representative of Black female teachers or academics, the literature suggests that what will be described is far from unique. It is my hope that this article will resonate beyond my individual story, contributing to broader conversations on the intersection of race, gender, and the negotiation of authenticity within academia.

## Theoretical frameworks

This article draws on three different conceptual frameworks: critical race theory (CRT), performativity, and Kernis and Goldman's (2006) multi-model concept of authenticity.

### *Critical race theory and counter-narratives*

One of the core principles of CRT as an analytical framework is the use of counter storytelling, to centre lived experiences of individuals living and working within White dominated environments (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). As such, this framework will be employed in the analysis presented in this paper, as similar work focussed on race and racialised perspectives within education systems in both the US and, more recently, in the UK have demonstrated its suitability for narrative inquiry (Bryan *et al.*, 2022; Doharty et al., 2021; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Andrews *et al.*, 2024; Mahony and Weiner, 2019; Rollock, 2012, Showunmi, 2023). The power of storytelling in scholarly work cannot be understated as it 'exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color' (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 26). It is through our subjective realities that we, as Black educators, can make sense of our experiences; theorise the multiple ways in which we have been named, labelled, positioned, and racialised; highlight the pervasiveness of everyday racism in the workplace; examine the impact on our identities and authenticity, and challenge the status quo.

### *Race and performativity*

Butler's (1990; 1993; 2004) theory of gender performativity challenges essentialist ideologies, arguing that male/female gender categories are not pre-determined but created through naming and defined by societal norms of behaviour. Performance is examined through utterances (labelling gender) and acts (conscious and unconscious behaviour), with societal expectations instrumental in shaping individual behaviour. As such, not only is gender identity performed but it is often simultaneously negotiated by the sometimes contradictory identities imposed by others. Butler's

more recent work (2010) extends performativity theory in a way that can be applied to race and racialised bodies, highlighting the systemic devaluing of those from minority backgrounds. The argument is that just as gender is not inherent but constructed through performance, racial categories are neither fixed nor natural but are socially created and reinforced through the ways people 'perform' or 'do' race. The perception of race as a fixed construct is problematised through the concept of racial frames that link physical characteristics of those from racial and ethnically minority backgrounds to stereotypical representations of racial identity (Chadderton, 2013; Rich, 2004; Nayak, 2006). In the US, racial perceptions are often based on one's appearance, where if you look Black, you are Black. And you are Black because you look Black. Perry and Bodehausen's (2008) study on mixed-race individuals highlights this issue with the equation: White + Black = Black. These normative frameworks inevitably influence public perceptions and policy and contribute to the complex lived experiences of those who are deemed 'other' in this society.

Research on Black faculty in US HE has highlighted examples of students' assumptions and perceptions of Black teachers' racial identity – regardless of whether the instructor self-identifies as Black American or non-American Black. For instance, a Black male professor in Han *et al.* (2018) study observed, "When people see me, a Black male, it appears like a 'CD' comes on that expects them to experience 'Angry Black Male Syndrome.' But when I open my mouth and they hear my accent, they get confused. It's not just a Black male, but one with a foreign accent. So, they assume that they cannot understand me. Some of them assume that I cannot be intelligent enough to be in the position that I am in." (p. 88). Penn's (2017) work on Black women in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) highlighted similar sentiments, as expressed in this comment by a participant's student who remarked, "You're so pretty…you must be from Africa – not just Black American" (p. 122). Chung Constant (2012), a Black-Jewish English language instructor, recounted a similar interaction with a new student who remarked, "I did not come to America to learn bad English, and everyone knows that Black people in America speak bad English" (p. 172). In these examples, Blackness is both essentialised (bad English = African American English) and subject to hierarchical categorisation (a Black male with an American accent might be perceived more favourably than one with a foreign accent, or an African might be considered more attractive than an African American). My doctoral study on Black English language educators, most participants reported that students questioned their

Blackness, perhaps because they were light skinned, mixed race, spoke other languages fluently, or had a non-American sounding name (Nabukeera, 2022). For these teachers, their professional lives became a performance – a balancing act that involved self-affirming their own Black identities while also managing the stereotypical impressions in the classrooms and work environment.

*Authenticity*

There are numerous conceptualisations of authenticity, but for the purposes of this paper, I will draw on Kernis and Goldman's (2006) multi component model where authenticity is defined as 'the unobstructed operation of one's true – or core – self in ones' daily enterprise' (p. 294). In other words, true authenticity as congruent between one's actions and one's true self. Four components of authenticity are highlighted: 1) awareness, which entails an ongoing self-exploration of one's desires, goals, strengths, and weaknesses; 2) unbiased processing, which involves the ability to objectively evaluate oneself without distortion or denial of external feedback; 3) behaviour informed by one's self-awareness and unbiased processing; and 4) relational orientation, which determines the level of openness, sincerity, and vulnerability that an individual brings into their close relationships with others.

In applying relational components 3 and 4 to the field of education, authenticity has been conceptualised in the relationships between students and faculty. Examples of authenticity include relational fidelity – ensuring that teachers take students' unique perspectives into consideration as they relate with them (Barnacle and Dall' Aba, 2017), attuned responsiveness – being fully present during student interactions, and approachability (Dall' Alba, 2009). Gravett and Winstone's (2022) research in the context of HE noted that while some of the principles may be difficult for teachers to apply, considering workload and class sizes, genuine dialogue and attuned responsiveness are important factors for demonstrating authenticity. Ultimately, 'for the students in this study, being accepted as an individual is very important' (p. 369). The underlying implication is that authentic teaching involves not only self-awareness, as Shakespeare's 'know thyself' suggests, but also to recognise and acknowledge students' individuality in order to engage with them through responsiveness, attunement, and respect. But what happens when the teacher's own identity is under scrutiny in the classroom? To what extent can they fully embody their authentic selves in this space to extend care to their students? The narratives that follow are taken from two classroom

incidents that happened in the US, where I spent more than a decade of my English language teaching career.

**Narratives**

*Narrative 1:*

> It was one of my first teaching jobs in the US, following three years of teaching in HE abroad. In one of my intensive English classes was an older (late 40s) male student from a Middle Eastern country. A few weeks into teaching, I was called into the Head of School's (HOS) office and informed that this student had issued several complaints about me, saying I am 'not a good teacher'. This was surprising, as he had never communicated any concerns to me, but I also knew that his English proficiency was relatively limited. I told the HOS I would address the issue with him directly. The next week, when I approached him in class, he refused to speak to me, responding in Arabic to another student instead. The student translated the comment as, "I came to learn English in America; why is she teaching me"? In subsequent lessons, he began to shout and berate me in front of his classmates, and on one occasion, shushed me like a pet when I tried to approach his desk to speak with him. He continued to criticise my teaching in every lesson, often being so disruptive that I was not able to continue with class. Because I was relatively new, both to the country and the institution, I was not entirely sure what the protocol was for these kinds of situations, as I had asked the student to leave, and he had refused. I had also spoken to the HOS a few times and requested that he be transferred out of my class. No action was taken and, for a month, this student's behaviour persisted. Already grappling with grief over a recent family loss, I developed intense anxiety and considered resigning. Eventually, a senior White colleague noticed my distress and spoke to the HOS on my behalf, which led to the removal of this student from my class.

*Narrative 2:*

> Four years later, at a different institution, in the third week of teaching my EAP postgraduate writing course, I noticed that a male student who had never attended

> any classes was sitting alone at the back of the room. In the small group of twelve students, his presence stood out as he remained focused on his phone while others participated in a group task. When I approached to ask if he was in the right class, he ignored me. I asked him, again, to put his phone away and he continued. Thinking he had not heard me, I repeated myself, and then, he flatly replied, "No." Surprised by his abrasiveness, especially because I did not know this student, I told him he either needed to join the group or leave the class. He looked at me and said, "I'm not leaving." Not wanting to escalate the situation in front of the other students, I let it go. Later, I emailed his advisor, who immediately arranged a meeting with myself and the department head (HOD). I subsequently learned that this student had already had several meetings concerning his non-attendance that had been flagged up and could not be ignored due to visa requirements. When his advisor had asked why he was not attending my core class, he'd apparently said, "I don't like her. There's nothing she can teach me." Although this was told directly to the HOD a few weeks prior, I had not been informed. The HOD admitted, "I've had several conversations with him. He has said some racist things, he's clearly got issues". She then offered me two options: "the student could be asked to apologise and thereafter remain in my class or simply transfer to another. It was up to me". I chose the latter. Later, another colleague shared that this student, who was also taking his class, had made derogatory comments about me while in his class. Although the student did not mention my name, my colleague assumed the comments were directed towards me as I was the only Black person on the teaching team.

**Discussion**

*Race, gender, language*

In both stories, I experienced a frustration common to most teachers – students challenging authority in the classroom, but the racialised bias implicit in these interactions is worth exploring. The comment, "I came to learn English in America; why is she teaching me?" reveals two things: the first, that I am perceived as 'unqualified', based on the students' perception of what an English teacher in America should look like, and simultaneously, their

assumptions about what someone like me should be. I wondered if the comment could simply have been a cultural misunderstanding, potentially arising from my femaleness and race, which conflicted with his perception of the role of Black women. These roles may dictate that more deference is accorded to male teachers, for example. However, the emphasis on 'she' in that utterance does suggest an understanding that goes beyond my perceived competence or lack thereof. To this student, I am not the right kind of teacher, I do not belong in the role of an educator, and while there is never an overt racial slur, his defiance implies a bias that is largely informed by what he can see – a Black woman who speaks English with a non-American accent. These three intersecting identity markers, possibly, shaped the dynamics in this interaction. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality examines how the multiple marginalities that Black women embody often determine the overlapping oppressions they are subjected to.

While the student's limited English proficiency might have impacted his ability to express his concerns either directly to me or in a more constructive manner, it is notable that he perceived me as inherently incapable of teaching him the language he sought to learn. This further confirms that his comments were not just about my teaching abilities. The racialisation of my competence is also evident in the second story with the statement, "there's nothing she can teach me". These words are a rejection of my authority based on my racial identity particularly because, unlike in the first narrative, this student had never attended any of my classes, and did not have an informed opinion of my teaching. As such, his preconceived judgment, and then his open defiance while in the classroom, confirm his bias, as well as a racialised hierarchy in which he positions himself as superior. Thus, Black educators in HE globally must contend with not only the biases or prejudices that students may have towards any teacher of any race or gender, but their linguistic identities, nationality, and sexuality are also called into question (Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Han *et al.*, 2018; Rollock, 2023; Stockfelt, 2018; Showunmi, 2023).

*Competence, power, resistance*

Students' behaviour and resistance to authority in these narratives demonstrates the subtle underpinnings of racialisation. In the first story, the student shouts, is disruptive for several lessons, refuses to speak to me directly but is able to make several complaints to the HOS. While this behaviour is not atypical as student complaints are part of teaching, his actions are not merely an expression of a

personal grievance. It is both the refusal to communicate directly with me even when I suggest that his classmates translate, and the dismissive behaviour, berating, belittling and disrespect that leads to a breakdown in our relationship. It is interesting that he can communicate very politely with the white female HOS, a detail she later shares with me. He also rejects the hierarchical structure implicit in my position as a teacher and instead chooses to question the legitimacy of my role. The question then becomes, 'would this student have behaved differently if I was White, male or both?' With the second incident, the racial prejudice is more direct, though not apparent to me during that interaction in class. And it is clear that his refusal to engage in the class, or comply with instructions, is mostly driven by his belief that a Black woman cannot teach him or tell him what to do. The repeated comments made to others – his advisor, the department head, and my colleague – are not isolated incidents but are a continuous rejection of not only my authority but my identity. Both stories highlight how, through words and actions, whether consciously or unconsciously, students construct and reinforce racialised and gendered perceptions of competence and authority. This raises broader questions about issues of power and authority in the classroom. How can educators who do not fit expected racial, linguistic, and cultural norms navigate challenges to their legitimacy without reproducing oppressive power structures?

*Non-performance performance*

These narratives demonstrate how administrators seemed to downplay or dismiss the racial undertones in these cases. The failures from both- one who does not intervene on my behalf until another colleague raises the issue, and the other chose who does not take immediate action despite her own admission of racism is telling. In the second story, the option for the student to apologise and remain or be transferred to another module is also revealing; the former option is presented to me as a viable or reasonable option despite the awareness of the racist undertones in the incident. Although I was marginalised, responsibility for resolving the situation was still placed upon me. The department head did not directly confront the student regarding his racism, which inevitably simplified this issue to atypical student behavior. In both incidents, there was no effort made to address the underlying racial dynamics that played a role in these incidents beyond the statement he's said some racist things. Mostly, there was no clear understanding of the mental and psychological stress caused. This fits in with other studies that highlight instances of institutional denial- or non-

response where administrators either lack awareness about the full racial implications of reported racialised incidents or are unwilling to take a stronger stance (Ahmed, 2016; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020; McShane, 2021). Instead, the admission of racism is instead viewed as a solution. Mahony and Weiner (2019) and Gabriel and Tate (2017) highlight anecdotes from racialised Black or Brown staff who reported incidents of students' racist remarks and were instead instructed to apologise to the students. In my case, it took a senior colleague to intervene before any support was offered. The lack of appropriate action is a powerful example of the on-going performance of racism, a dynamic non-performativity, "a way of not doing something by appearing to do something" (Ahmed, 2018; p.334). In the sense that inaction is still an action that institutions use to reinforce the status quo and prevent meaningful change (Doharty, *et al.* 2021). Black academics who are often the sole faculty or one of very few in their departments, faculties, and schools, sense this performativity allyship as it shows up as either fake outrage (the promise to do something but no real action is taken) or silence (the refusal to engage in explicit discussions of racism in the workplace). But "silence is as much a withholding as it is a vernacular" (Ohito, 2024, p.1). Inaction communicates that we are not important enough to be taken seriously (Arday, 2021; Arday and Mirza, 2018; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Kubota and Motha, 2024).

*Black Authenticity*

> "The world saw blackness in me before it saw anything else and operated around me with blackness in mind" (Varaidzo, 2016, p.12)

Authenticity, the way society understands it to be, is a tremendous ask for faculty of colour working in academia in the West. In their review of the literature on Black authenticity, Nguyen and Anthony (2014) argue that although what it means to be Black differs depending on context, cultural ideologies and societal expectations, Black authenticity has been commodified and reinforced white norms through the Othering of Black culture and the imposition of white ideals on Black bodies. These representations constrain Black identity to the extent that Black students in HE report feelings of alienation attempt to find their own authenticity within the narrow parameters and socially constructed group norms of race and class in British HE. The researchers further advocate for similar research on "Black women's sense of an authentic self- whether or not Black women can be authentically Black while adhering to

white standards" (p.776). Within the US context, Duran's (2022) further builds on this argument by critiquing the narrow concept of authenticity in HE that does not consider the perspective of the racialised. The argument is that not only do systemic inequalities and microaggressions weigh heavily on our psyches, but "the assumptions about how to be authentic tend to align with a dominant culture ideology" (p. 13). It is not just about bringing our authentic selves to white dominant spaces, but it also about "how much" of our authentic selves are safe to display without enduring further interrogation, stereotyping, or judgment (p.15).

Hence, my criticism of the Kernis and Goodman model (2006) presented earlier, because in order to be authentic one must feel safe. In both incidents, I made the effort to confront these challenging situations objectively. In the first one, I tried to address the student's concerns directly and reason with him, and in the second, sought immediate support from the administration. However, the administration failed to provide the transparency and validation needed for unbiased processing. My decision to transfer the student rather than continue to subject myself to continued hostility showed a level of self-awareness- the resolve to protect my well-being and professional boundaries- but the failure of both administrators to hold students accountable created a barrier for genuine relational orientation.

As has been shown throughout this discussion, my race precedes me in the classroom as encapsulated in the quotation at the beginning of this section. Thus, when discussing authenticity in the workplace, several questions arise: How can I bring my genuine self into the classroom where my Blackness could be subject to scrutiny and interrogation? To what extent can authenticity exist in such a space? As the narratives illustrate, my race is problematised, weaponized, and reduced to a racialised construct, yet the racism is completely ignored, or not directly addressed. Butler's (1999) theory can be used to argue that authenticity is itself performative. As such, authentic racial or gender identity does not exist prior to its performance but is continually constructed. This concept resonates with my experience during the first few weeks of meeting new students. I enter classrooms more guarded, aware that my Blackness may lead to stereotyping or being perceived as a space invader (Puwar, 2004)-an anomaly in an environment where Black women are underrepresented. I intentionally smile more, adopt a friendlier, more approachable demeanour, to counter the angry Black woman trope while also emphasising my qualifications as a kind of reassurance to students that I am twice

as good. In doing so, I perform a version of Blackness shaped by perceived societal expectations in order to allow my work to fairly speak for itself. Beyond this continued negotiation and impression management is the lasting psychological toll that impacts mental wellbeing, and professional engagement. Research highlights racial battle fatigue for educators of colour that reverberates inward through personal health impacts and outwards in shaping academic careers (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Mahony and Weiner, 2019; Rollock, 2023; Showunmi, 2023; Stockfelt, 2018). The question then is not how to 'be authentic' in the classroom, but how our performance of Blackness is shaped by the social and institutional forces that define and redefine it. Thus, while authenticity demands that we create safe spaces for students to be themselves, classrooms may not always be safe spaces for Black educators to embody their true authentic selves.

Finally, in reflecting on authenticity as I write this paper, I am acutely aware of my professional image and the ways in which I may be perceived by those who might read this piece. I am mindful of the weight and implications of the words I share here, knowing that they may take on a life of their own, even within the structured confines of academic discourse. I am also mindful of the societal constructed limits on my personal authenticity-the boundaries and the necessity to remain boundaried. There are inherent risks to showing the level of authenticity I wish to express- my unfiltered thoughts, emotions and reactions towards the events and the people I have discussed. When you are used to being the only one in the work environment, these are important considerations (Doharty, *et al.* 2021; Gabriel and Silva, 2017; Kubota and Motha, 2024). It must be mentioned that even though my Blackness is performed in response to social contexts, it is a source of pride. It is not simply a constructed identity based on external expectations; but is both curated and true to who I am, even in situations where I actively perform it. As Varaidzo (2016, p.20) poignantly states, "my authentic self is my default performance, the person I am when I'm not thinking…my authentic self stays black. She stays black when people are present, and she stays black when people are not".

**Conclusion**

Using performativity theory and its application to race within the context of English language teaching, this paper has examined the intersection of race and gender identity in a work environment where the instructor is a Black woman. The narratives presented here are subject to various interpretations. Nonetheless, they

illustrate how performative utterances and acts may shape racialised perceptions of English language educators, the role of institutional performative neutrality in perpetuating racialisation, and the constraints of teacher authenticity within these dynamics. Future research and scholarship of teaching and learning could explore how educators from other minoritised backgrounds navigate authenticity and the tensions between institutional expectations and personal identity. More importantly, there must be system where Black academics are comfortable enough to report incidents of racism without fear of judgement or repercussions. While students often have clear policies and support structures in place, similar protections are often absent for instructors of colour enduring different forms of injustices. Ensuring that such policies exist and are actively upheld is essential to fostering a safe and supportive environment for Black educators.

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# Advancing student engagement in business management education: The impact of practice-based role-play as a pedagogical tool

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**Keywords:** *Practice-based role-play, student engagement, competition, employability skills, classroom internships, consulting skills.*

## Abstract

This paper explores the findings of an action research (AR) project, part of a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCert HE) educational research project, aimed at understanding the impact of role play as a pedagogical tool to increase student engagement. The study involved a diverse cohort of 56 Master´s-level students enrolled in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme at a higher education (HE) institution in London. A mixed methods approach was adopted, combining surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participant observations to gather comprehensive data to understand the impact of role-play as a method for increasing student engagement and consequent academic outcomes. Using Lewin´s AR model, this study followed the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (2018) with ethical approval given by the university´s ethical board, and the findings validated through triangulation principles to minimise researcher bias and ensure reliability. The study achieved a 60% response rate from participants across two different seminar groups, with the results indicating a strong positive relationship between the use of role-play and increased student engagement. Role-playing activities fostered active participation, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving amongst learners. The competitive elements embedded in the role-playing activities, such as 'internship role-playing', resulting in significant improvements in key employability and consulting skills – including communication,

leadership, and strategic decision-making. The high pass rates for the module (96.5% for group 7 and 88.9% for group 12), further validates the effectiveness of this teaching approach.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that role-play, when integrated into business curriculum, holds significant potential for improving learning outcomes and preparing students for real-world challenges, lowering the gap between academia and practice. These results provide a basis for further exploration and refinement of active learning strategies in HE, contributing to authenticity in teaching and learning in HE.

**Introduction**

One of the contemporary challenges of Higher Education (HE) institutions fuels conversations around bridging the gap between theory and practice, for practitioners (Grafström, Jonsson and Klintman, 2023; Cohen, 2007; Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007) as well as for learners (Boud and Solomon, 2000; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Jackson, 2015). With this issue in mind, this research project was developed to address the applicability of practice-based learning through role-play activities in HE institutions as an approach to enhance student engagement and outcomes for one of the most complex modules (SG7001) within the Master´s in Business Administration (MBA) programme in a university in the United Kingdom (UK). Focused on the impact of role-play as a pedagogical tool, an Action Research (AR) project was developed with implementation of team-based consulting projects paired with 'in-class' role-play internship activities, to facilitate a new learning experience for students, aiming therefore to provide insightful analysis and recommendations for effective and interactive educational approaches that can best support the learning and engagement of learners in HE, especially those undertaking postgraduate studies.

> **Research question:** 'To what extent does the integration of practice-based role-play and team-based consulting projects enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in the SG7001 module of the MBA programme?'

This research question encapsulates the core elements of the AR project by highlighting a shift toward a relational, practice-oriented methodology. It emphasises the use of role-play and collaborative consulting assignments designed to narrow the divide between

theory and practice, thereby fostering a more engaging and effective learning environment for students.

**Context**

Effective teaching is, according to Biggs (2014), an action requiring constructive alignment that ensures that learning activities and assessments are geared towards the desired learning outcomes whilst also being engaging for students. This principle is also embedded in the UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) prompting significant implications for HE professionals, especially regarding how teaching and curriculum development, as well as student engagement, are approached (Office for Students, 2023). The notion of reflexivity – a key promoter of self-examination that encourages educators to critically reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and professional engagement – is another key consideration that was applied throughout this research to enhance the teaching and learning experiences for learners as well as educators (Brookfield, 2017).

Furthermore, as an educator teaching the SG7001 module, through continuous reflexivity, and observations complemented with student feedback, I observed a common sentiment among students enrolled on the module – a diminishing interest in the seminar activities, attributable to the overly theoretical nature of the content, evidenced by a notable decline in attendance over the weeks. Most critically, students reported an inability to relate the theoretical concepts taught across the module with any practical implications.

These findings highlighted the need to implement innovative strategies to foster student engagement and participation, particularly among learners managing multiple commitments—a demographic that comprised most MBA students at the institution where the AR project was conducted.

Through continuous research and informed considerations, practice-based role-play proposed great possibilities for positive changes within this programme, enabling students to engage with 'in-class', practice-led consulting projects as well as internship role-playing activities that required learners to 'step out of their comfort zones' to foster the development of key leadership and critical thinking competencies.

Noor *et al* (2020) emphasised the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation through the development of active learning

environments that facilitate dynamic exploration and personal development over rigid theoretical frameworks. Thus, based on their work, this AR project sought to prioritise the development of a learning environment that is conducive to adaptation and discovery, offering a stimulating solution to the previous, overly theoretical approach and content.

**Empowering authenticity and higher education through action research**

Empowering authenticity in HE through AR requires a commitment to continuous reflection and adaptation. As noted by Efron and Ravid (2013), AR serves as a systematic inquiry that enables educators to identify pedagogical challenges, implement interventions, and assess their effectiveness. Furthermore, recent explorations of AR (Jensen and Dikilitas, 2025; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2020; Gibbs *et al.*, 2017) expanding upon foundational scholarship (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Carr and Kemmis, 1986), positions AR as a transformative mechanism for social change through self-reflective inquiry aimed at promoting social justice. These contemporary studies further demonstrate AR's capacity to enhance authenticity in teaching and learning, reinforcing its role in fostering meaningful and equitable educational practices.

Moreover, McNiff (2002) highlights AR's combination of diagnosis, action, and reflection, which empowers educators to challenge ineffective practices and improve outcomes. By engaging in ongoing cycles of action and reflection, practitioners can address issues of immediate concern while enhancing their competencies. Reflexivity is a crucial aspect of AR, requiring practitioners to continuously reflect on how their biases and actions influence the research, ultimately leading to more authentic teaching and learning experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Newby, 2010). In educational settings, AR empowers educators to simultaneously take on the roles of teacher and researcher, driving improvements in student outcomes. As Stewart (2024) explains, the cyclical nature of AR allows for constant refinement of educational practices, making it an essential approach for authentic engagement in HE. Models such as those of Lewin (1946) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) emphasise the importance of planning, acting, and reflecting to ensure continuous improvement, while Stringer's (2008) participatory action research highlights the value of community involvement and social justice, which are key to fostering authenticity in educational contexts.

## Action research model chosen for this intervention

This research adopted Kurt Lewin's AR model as it allows a comprehensive and cyclical approach to the inquiry in various stages:

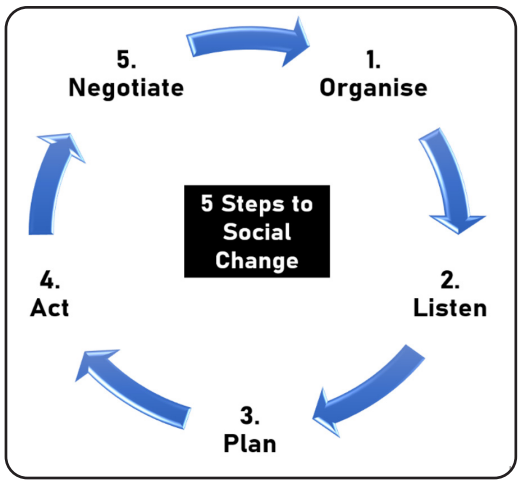


**Figure 1.** Five steps to social change (Citizens UK, 2024)

Throughout this process, it is expected that researchers engage in reflexivity to critically examine their assumptions, biases, and different perspectives to promote transparency, self-awareness, and ethical conduct, and the development of contextually grounded research findings (Clark and Johnson, 2019). Although this process allows practitioners to find solutions to pertinent issues/problems in their practice, it can present myriad complexities and challenges. Navigating through 'multiple roles, power dynamics, and ethical considerations throughout the research process' is one of many challenges that may arise, requiring the researcher´s continuous focus and attention (Clark and Johnson, 2019, p. 289).

## The intervention

The SG7001 module, a core component of the MBA programme, had developed an intimidating reputation amongst students, often being perceived as challenging and arduous, with a pass rate of 64.9% in 2022/2023. Student disengagement and feedback highlighted the overly theoretical content and delivery issues associated with the module, which further exacerbated the need for change. To tackle this challenge, a practice-based role-play intervention was designed to deepen the exploration of role-play as an instructional strategy, aiming to transform the learner engagement paradigm, enhance active participation, and drive better student outcomes.

The ‘in-class’ role-play consulting and internship AR project took place in Semester A of 2024, and the activities spanned from Week 2 to Week 10 of teaching and involved students from two seminar groups of the SG7001 module, respectively named Groups 7 and 12. Each week, a number of students (on a rotational basis, in their respective seminar groups) had the opportunity to share knowledge and experience with the opposing consulting team, allowing them to observe, develop new skills, and present their findings to the entire class (referred to as the ‘client panel’). Each student had the opportunity to rotate as CEO, leading the team and honing strategic skills aligned with the module outcomes. The activities included business-oriented case studies aligned with the module’s learning outcomes and adapted from the proposed seminar activities. This required learners to actively engage with the learning material to propose solutions to real business issues within their consulting teams. Internship role-playing activities were introduced as competitive elements to further engage learners, with high performing teams being able to lead on projects and make key decisions that impacted both groups.

**Literature review**

Crookall and Hart (1982) underscored role-play as a powerful educational tool that stimulates active learning, builds social connections, and nurtures both personal and professional growth. Bonwell and Eison (1991) added that when students are actively involved, they develop deeper understanding and sharpen their critical thinking skills. However, a persistent challenge in HE, identified by Bligh (2000), is the disconnect between theory and practice, with students often finding it difficult to see the practical relevance of abstract concepts.

When teaching large cohorts, particularly in complex subjects that demand critical thinking and active participation, traditional, teacher-centred approaches, often passive and minimally engaging, may yield limited effectiveness. This challenge is especially evident in business education, where learners are expected to cultivate a solutions-oriented mindset (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Freeman and Dobbins, 2013). Research shows that role-play enhances students’ ability to remember and apply what they have learned (Li and Lo, 2019) while also increasing engagement and motivation (Koppitz and Dresel, 2019), improving communication and social skills (Wang and Chen, 2018), and fostering empathy and cultural competence (Smith *et al.*, 2017). Although there is extensive discourse on the benefits of role-play

as a pedagogical device, the literature lacks support from empirical studies – especially within HE settings (Forbes, 2021) – and often highlights significant implementation challenges. For instance, time constraints can hinder role-playing integration, particularly in content-heavy courses (Johnson *et al.*, 2018). Training inefficiencies, as well as learners' resistance to the adoption of this approach are outlined as some of the key challenges for educators attempting to create an engaging environment (Smith and Wilson, 2020). Furthermore, the application of role-play through constructive alignment in HE remains complex. As such, aligning teaching with learning outcomes—a core principle of Biggs' (1999) constructive alignment theory —can be particularly challenging in highly theoretical modules. Nevertheless, constructivist learning theories, grounded in the writings of Piaget (1980) and Vygotsky (1978), position learners as active agents in their learning experience, integrating new knowledge with prior understanding. This reinforces the value of role-play as a teaching strategy, as it fosters collaboration and facilitates experiential learning.

## Methodology

A participatory action research (PAR) approach was deployed, focused on collective participation including the researcher (seminar tutor) and students. As outlined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p. 349), PAR recognises the researcher 'as a facilitator, guide, formulator and summariser of knowledge' – a role embodied by the practitioner throughout this process. Further, the notion of PAR is not only distinguished by its methodology, which is focused on collective participation and outcomes pinned on principles of democracy, voice, and emancipation but also on the overall prospect of facilitation of positive change. In the context of this research, student engagement is the primary area of focus. By following Lewin´s (1946) AR model, this project addressed different cycles of planning, action, and observation.

## Research sample

This project engaged 58 students (30 students from Seminar Group 7 and 28 from Group 12). Before initiating the research, students were informed about the aim of the project being included in each cycle of the experiment. Principles of inclusion criteria were adopted to ensure that all participants were open to participatory learning approaches and fully understood their roles within this experiment. For instance, these principles ensured that participants selected for the study understood that they were directly relevant

to the research question under analysis. Furthermore, establishing well-defined eligibility parameters enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings, as a carefully chosen sample improves the likelihood that the results accurately reflect the broader population under analysis with the possibility of the applicability of the findings being considered beyond the immediate study sample (Creswell, 2017).

**Data Collection**

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used to gather the relevant data for this intervention. The chosen qualitative data collection methods for this research included observations and semi-structured interviews conducted in Weeks 5 and 10 of the study, which enabled the gathering of insightful data relating to students' experiences throughout this experiment. Additionally, a blend of quantitative and qualitative data was gathered via anonymous surveys.[2] Further insights into the data collection methodology applied to this study can be explored in the notes. [1]

**Survey design**

The survey comprised eight questions, including two open-ended items aimed at assessing student engagement, satisfaction levels, and skill development, while also soliciting students´ constructive feedback to enhance the overall process. Surveys were administered using Mentimeter, an online platform that facilitates real-time, interactive, and anonymous responses, thereby streamlining the overall data collection process. The platform's engaging and user-friendly interface was also an advantage to the study, encouraging higher responses rates in comparison to traditional survey methods (Johnson and Christensen, 2014). However, some limitations of this data collection method can be found in the notes. [3]

**Addressing common method bias**

To strengthen the validity of the study and reduce common method bias (CMB), this research employed methodological triangulation, incorporating quantitative survey data alongside qualitative observations and interviews (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Using multiple data collection techniques allowed for cross-validation of findings, mitigating potential biases linked to a single method (Denzin, 2012; Podsakoff *et al.,* 2003). The survey responses provided quantifiable

insights into student engagement, while observations captured real-time behavioural interactions, and interviews offered in-depth perspectives on students' learning experiences. By integrating these methods, the study ensured a more comprehensive, reliable, and credible assessment of the effectiveness of role-play as an educational tool for enhancing student engagement.

Furthermore, reflexivity was upheld throughout the study, enabling the researcher to critically evaluate their potential influence and biases at every stage of the research process (Malterud, 2001).

**Ethical considerations**

This study followed the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (2018) with ethical approval granted by the university´s ethical board, before the start of the intervention. Additionally, an ethical research checklist was submitted and approved by both the course module leader and the SG7001 module leader, in alignment with the BERA guidelines (2024). The data collection methods, particularly the surveys, were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality, thereby fostering trust and encouraging higher response rates (Dillman *et al.*, 2014).

To ensure ethical conduct, all participants were informed of the project's aims and objectives before the start of the study. Due to the nature of qualitative research, where participant identities may be identifiable, the researcher strictly adhered to the ethical principle of primum non nocere – which ensures that no harm or risk were inflicted upon participants (Cohen, Manion and Morriso, 2011).

**Data analysis**

*Survey data analysis*

Given the small research sample and time constraints, descriptive statistics were not employed, as the focus was on extracting insightful trends rather than statistical generalisability. The quantitative data obtained from Mentimeter enabled an exploratory analysis of student perceptions regarding role-play's effectiveness in enhancing engagement, comprehension, and practical skill development.

*Qualitative data analysis*

Qualitative data from student interviews and open-ended survey responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. This process involved familiarisation with the data, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and final reporting.

**Results and evaluation**

The role-play activities commenced in Week 2 and continued until Week 10 as part of the module's seminar sessions. During this period, rather than engaging in the pre-set traditional group activities outlined in the seminar activity guide, students participated in immersive role-playing exercises, working within two simulated 'in-class' consulting firms and assuming various professional roles.

**Survey results**

The results of the surveys indicate a strong positive reception to the use of role-play as a pedagogical tool in the seminar setting (see Appendix, Figure 2). The high percentages of students from both Group 7 (90% 'very much' and 10% 'yes') and Group 12 (94% 'very much' and 6% 'yes') enjoying the role-playing exercises reflect a clear engagement and enthusiasm toward the activity. Such findings are significant in the context of experiential learning, where active participation and immersion are crucial for developing practical skills and deeper understanding.

Crookal and Hart (1982) and Bligh (2000) suggest that the degree to which this activity was enjoyed by students is, potentially, linked to its ability to not only provide learners with an interactive space where they could take on the role of CEOs, and lead different projects and teams, but also, explore different areas of their employability skills and abilities. This data, aligned with observations from in-class interactions (especially from Week 10), shows that learners were able to progressively feel more confident as the weeks passed, acquiring a sense of 'more dominance' towards the concept of role-playing, which could, at least partly, explain why most of the learners enjoyed this concept. It is acknowledged, however, that the variance between learners who opted for 'very much' and 'yes', does not present significant data to suggest contradicting results regarding the acceptance of this approach amongst learners.

The degree to which learners feel confident to work as part of a team after this experiment – results from Groups 7 and 12

Both groups responded that the role-playing activities supported them to feel more confident working as part of a team (100% of learners from both groups stated 'yes' to the proposed question.

These results are also aligned with the observations gathered throughout the research. Students from both groups became progressively more comfortable working as part of the team as the weeks passed, building a supportive relationship to ensure a positive performance from their team. Instead of working in group 'silos', students embraced the challenge and started to act in a competitive manner towards the other team, which increased their engagement towards the activities.

Although not expected in the beginning, it was observed that when competitive elements were added to the role-playing, students would become more eager to participate and work to outperform the other team, especially during the internship activities. It was observed that when introduced in a different environment, working with a different team, interns were more likely to assume an active role and demonstrate that they were adequately 'trained' by their original teams to deliver a reliable performance. Team loyalty was particularly present, outlining that these activities enabled students to get to know each other better, and essentially, create significant team bonds.

**Role-play and employability skills – results from survey**

The results from this survey show that 61% of students from Group 7 responded that working as part of a consulting firm enabled them to improve their employability skills 'very much', whilst 39% of students responded that it helped them 'to some extent'. On the other hand, 73% of students from Group 12 stated that working as part of a consulting firm enabled them to improve their employability skills 'very much', whilst 27% stated that it helped them 'to some extent'.

As expected, most students from both groups outlined that the role-playing activities also supported them to work on their employability skills, with 66% overall stating that the activities helped them 'to some extent'. By acting as an active participant on this research project, the researcher also provided feedforward to all students,

focusing especially on their employability skills and consultancy proficiency. Interview findings from Week 5 shows that when asked about how confident students felt regarding their employability skills (communication, teamwork, problem solving, self-management, organisation, and planning) the most recurrent theme on their responses was of a positive and enthusiastic tone stating that they felt that these activities really supported them to work on areas that they needed to further develop and to some extent, overcome, and/or work towards, overcoming the fear of public speaking.

**Final module results and links to the research**

The high pass rates observed in both groups after this experiment serve as a strong indicator that student engagement, facilitated through role-playing activities, was a key driver of academic success. Engagement in active learning methods has been widely recognised as a critical factor in student achievement, with research demonstrating that experiential learning approaches, such as role-play, enhance comprehension and retention by fostering active participation in the learning process (Kolb, 2014). Additionally, role-play and other interactive learning strategies have been shown to deepen cognitive engagement, leading to improved academic performance when compared with traditional, lecture-based teaching methods (Prince, 2004). The positive outcomes in this study further support existing literature, which highlights that experiential activities not only boost engagement and academic success but also contribute to the development of essential soft skills, such as teamwork and communication, which are increasingly valued in professional settings (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

However, the slight difference in pass rates between Group 7 (96.5%) and Group 12 (88.9%) suggests that factors such as group dynamics, consistency in implementation, and individual student characteristics may influence the effectiveness of role-playing interventions. These differences merit further investigation to fully understand the conditions that maximise the benefits of role-playing as a pedagogical tool.

**Implications for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

Previous research on the topic of active learning (Freeman *et al.*, 2014; Prince, 2004; Hmelo-Silver, 2004) and role-play as a pedagogical tool have demonstrated that this approach showed significant results on improving students' development of practical skills (Rao and Stupans, 2012), enhancement of

communication and teamwork (Matwiejczuk, 1997; Roubidoux *et al.,* 2017), and building confidence and engagement (Anderson, Krathwohl and Bloom, 2001; Lean *et al.*, 2006). Similarly, this AR project's findings demonstrate the value of role-play in the development of key employability skills as well as in the improvement of academic outcomes for postgraduate business students. The findings suggest that the integration of real-world simulations and case studies through role-play activities are beneficial not only for students' academic proficiency and results but also for their professional readiness. Throughout this project, students have demonstrated improved problem-solving abilities, enhanced collaborative skills, and higher levels of adaptability – competencies that are highly valued in contemporary workplaces. Also, the high pass rates observed for both groups are another mark of the success of this experiment, underscoring a crucial consideration for business educators in HE, that is, that interactivity plays a pivotal role in student success. Moreover, the findings of this study support the adoption of interactive, technology-enhanced classrooms, where digital tools and experiential learning strategies create environments that closely resemble real-world professional settings, preparing students for leadership roles in dynamic, team-based industries (Beetham and Sharpe, 2013; Biggs and Tang, 2011). While implementing innovative pedagogical strategies presents challenges, HE educators must also act as agents of change. With institutional support and faculty commitment, teaching and learning can be transformed into a more student-centred, interactive, and dynamic experience, equipping learners with the adaptive skills required to thrive in an evolving global workforce.

## Conclusion

Overall, the data analysis shows that this intervention was positively received by the students, and although the survey participation rate was below the expected due to student attendance (the survey was shared in Week 9 before the Easter break), insights gathered through the thematic analysis of interviews and observations align with the initial statement. Most students enjoyed the role-play activities (90% of students in Group 7 and 94% of students in Group 12) and stated that they were able to develop and/or enhance their consulting and employability skills. It was also interesting to note that when introducing elements of competition, students were more excited to engage, with a clear 'team belonging' sentiment being established, drawing, therefore, a positive relationship between gamification and learning.

On the other hand, time constraints, especially when providing feedback and feedforward to students, limited a more thorough influence on students' engagement. Criticism and pressure to complete activities were the most recurring themes that diminished students' enjoyment of the intervention, as expected. Although the intention of the AR was to provide students with an opportunity to improve their business technical and transferable skills, it is understandable that, at points, receiving critical feedback can foster feelings of failure amongst learners (Fong *et al.*, 2018). Despite all measures being taken to decrease this, and support learners with clear action steps to improve their skills, the results show that this sentiment remained amongst some learners, which provides future actionable steps for further improvement and investigation.

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**Notes:**

**1** Questionnaires are useful for collection of survey information since they are often easy to administer and straightforward to analyse. However, they require considerable time to be developed and refined (Wilson and McLean, 1994). Another data collection method that is primarily used for the purpose of gathering qualitative information is interviews. Interviews are grounded in social constructivism and phenomenology, helping researchers to gather in-depth insights into participants´ perspectives and experiences. Although interviews are flexible tools for data collection as they support the integration of open-ended questions, it is important to note first, that they are open to interviewer bias, and second, issues of inconvenience and anonymity may arise, which, if not addressed appropriately, may negatively impact the findings of the research (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 409).

**2** As outlined by Bryman (2016), surveys enable the collection of substantial amounts of data in a short amount of time, and their anonymisation encourages honest responses, which is a key aspect of ensuring the validity of findings. These findings will be able to support the understanding of the relationship between the independent variable (role play integration) and the dependent variable (student engagement).

**3** Although surveys are valuable tools for data collection, their self-reported nature can be subject to bias, and although the incorporation of anonymity can enhance student participation and honesty, data collected cannot be linked back to individual students for the purposes of following on the feedback received, and\or deeper analysis on findings (Creswell, 2017).

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# From theory to practice: An action research study on personalised group coaching for authentic learning in business simulations

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**Keywords:** *Business simulation, personalised group coaching, action research, professional identity development, student engagement.*

## Abstract

Business education increasingly recognises the need to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application, yet students often struggle to apply concepts in real-world contexts meaningfully. This action research study investigates how personalised group coaching enhances experiential learning in Master of Business Administration (MBA) business simulations at the University of East London, contributing to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning by examining authentic learning environments in business education.

Grounded in constructivist and social learning theories, this study employed Kemmis and McTaggart's cyclical model (2005) to implement structured coaching interventions. Thirty MBA students participated in weekly coaching sessions over six weeks while working in five competitive simulation groups. Data were collected through mixed methods, including surveys, systematic observations, focus groups, and document analysis.

The findings reveal significant improvements in students' engagement with realistic business challenges, with 85% of participants reporting enhanced ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios. Students rated the effectiveness of coaching in facilitating real-world applications at an average of 8.9 out of 10. Qualitative data demonstrated progression in

authentic professional capabilities, including improved decision-making confidence and strategic reasoning.

This research demonstrates that personalised group coaching creates genuine learning environments that transform theoretical business education into accurate professional preparation. The findings suggest that embedding coaching within business simulations is an effective strategy for developing genuine professional competencies and enhancing student engagement.

**Introduction**

The business education landscape has significantly evolved due to globalisation and technological advancement. As business practices change, traditional theoretical approaches alone no longer suffice to prepare graduates for real-world challenges (Abdullah *et al.*, 2013). Today's professionals must demonstrate both academic understanding and skills in creative thinking, communication, and interdisciplinary decision making (Buil *et al.*, 2019).

Business simulation exercises serve as an effective bridge between academic theory and industry practice. However, students often struggle with their complexity (Taylor *et al.*, 2012; Abdullah et al., 2013), which can hinder both learning outcomes and professional readiness. This highlights the need for improved support mechanisms that promote authentic learning.

Coaching has been recognised as a powerful tool for developing professional skills and fostering authenticity in education (Robertson, 2000; Bremner, Sakata, and Cameron 2022). This study investigates how personalised group coaching in business simulations can create realistic business challenges that mirror real-world issues; facilitate decision making that aligns with industry practices; develop students' professional identities through reflection; and support assessments that measure the real-world application of knowledge.

**The research question**

How does personalised group coaching in business simulation exercises influence students' professional development by enhancing authentic learning experiences?

Specifically, the study aimed to 1) explore how structured coaching

fosters engagement; 2) assess the impact of feedback on applying theory; 3) evaluate the coaching role in linking theory and practice; and 4) investigate professional skill development in authentic settings.

**Context**

The University of East London (UEL) represents a distinctive setting within higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK), characterised by its diverse student population and commitment to inclusive learning. Situated within the UK HE framework, business education at UEL increasingly emphasises practical skills development alongside theoretical knowledge.

Key contextual factors influencing this study include a UK-wide focus on employability and authentic skill-building in higher education; integration of professional development within the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) curriculum; and alignment with government initiatives promoting innovative, practice-based learning.

The MBA programme at UEL aligns with both local and national priorities by responding to industry demands for graduates with strong practical experience. Within this programme, this study focuses on the Business Simulation with Professional Development module – one of the core components attracting students from various business specialisations, including strategy development, operations management, financial management, and marketing.

Traditionally, the module combines lectures, seminars, and simulation-based assignments. However, student feedback and performance data revealed three key challenges: 1) limited accurate guidance in applying theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios; 2) Insufficient opportunities for genuine engagement with business challenges; and 3) a lack of authentic feedback during complex decision-making processes.

These gaps particularly affect international students, and those with limited prior business experience, who often struggle with the real-world application of business theories within the simulation environment. To address this, a coaching intervention was introduced, incorporating weekly group coaching sessions that were designed to reflect real-life consultancy scenarios; problem-solving tasks based on actual business challenges; and continuous feedback to support authentic skill development.

By embedding coaching within business simulations, this intervention leveraged UEL's diverse and inclusive educational environment to foster authentic learning experiences among students.

*Authenticity*

This research aligns with the journal's theme of 'authenticity' by demonstrating how personalised group coaching fosters genuine, real-world learning experiences in business education. The coaching intervention creates learning environments that bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, preparing students for the complexities of modern business practice.

Authenticity in this context manifests in several interconnected dimensions.

*Authentic business challenges*

The coaching sessions integrate real-world business scenarios that mirror genuine professional challenges, moving beyond simplified textbook examples to engage students with the complexity and ambiguity characteristic of actual business environments. Students reported that these realistic challenges enhanced their ability to translate theoretical knowledge into practical application, with one participant noting, "The simulations felt like genuine business situations rather than academic exercises".

*Authentic professional identity development*

Students develop realistic professional identities and behaviours through guided reflection and consistent feedback that aligns with industry expectations. The coaching process encourages students to move beyond surface-level understanding to develop genuine professional judgment and decision-making capabilities. As one student commented, "I began to think like a business professional rather than just a student completing an assignment".

*Authentic assessment*

The intervention incorporates assessment methods that evaluate students' genuine ability to apply business concepts in realistic contexts. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical understanding,

these assessments encouraged real-world application and demonstration of professional competencies through real-time decision making and problem solving. This approach reinforces the value of practical, experience-based learning by rewarding genuine application rather than memorisation.

Authentic learning relationships

The coaching relationship creates a unique learning community where instructors serve as mentors rather than mere knowledge providers. This reliable mentorship encourages students to engage honestly with their strengths and weaknesses, fostering personal growth. Students particularly valued the truthfulness of feedback received during coaching sessions, describing it as “more honest and useful than traditional academic feedback”.

These aspects of authenticity interweave throughout the coaching intervention, creating a learning environment that genuinely prepares students for business careers by developing both technical knowledge and authentic professional capabilities. By examining student experiences through this lens of authenticity, this study highlights how coaching interventions can transform business education from theoretical instruction to genuine professional preparation.

**Positionality**

My dual role, as both a recent MBA graduate and current lecturer, provides valuable insights into business simulation learning environments. This dual perspective enriches my understanding of the challenges and opportunities within these educational contexts, particularly in fostering reliable learning experiences in business education.

Having experienced business simulations from both sides, I recognise that learning requires more than technical input – it requires empathetic, structured support that encourages genuine engagement with real-world business challenges. This realisation directly shaped the design of the coaching intervention.

My pedagogical approach aligns with transformative learning theory, drawing from Slavich and Zimbardo’s (2012) framework. I believe that education should empower students to move beyond content acquisition to practical application and self-awareness. My experience with diverse student cohorts reinforces the importance

of creating learning environments that value authentic expression and engagement with real-world business challenges. I aligned the coaching intervention with Bremner, Sakata, and Cameron's (2022) call for personalised learning strategies to cultivate authentic student engagement and decision making.

This positionality influenced how I designed the research, anticipating barriers to authenticity and actively embedding support mechanisms. Being both an educator and a former student enabled me to create a space where theory met professional reality.

**Research approach**

Building on Kemmis and McTaggart's cyclical action research model, this study employed a systematic approach to investigating the impact of personalised group coaching within business simulation exercises. The research design prioritised both rigorous data collection and responsive adaptation to participant needs.

This action research project systematically implemented and evaluated a personalised group coaching intervention designed to foster authentic learning. The methodology encompassed several key steps to ensure the intervention's effectiveness and generate valuable insights.

This study was conducted using a nonlinear exploration method (Smith, 2018) to determine the effectiveness of personalised group coaching in business simulation exercises. This method allows for a deeper understanding of the complexity inherent in the research process.

In addition, this research project used reflective journaling, requiring students to document their thoughts, experiences, and insights throughout the coaching process, which provided valuable data for analysis and reflection on the authenticity of their learning experiences (Jones and Williams, 2008).

This research began with a recognition of the need to address a specific challenge within my teaching practice: the desire to enhance students' professional development by providing authentic support and guidance during business simulation activities. In this regard, the methodology encompassed several key steps aimed at ensuring the effectiveness of the intervention and generating valuable insights.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted through the Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) in Learning and Teaching in HE programme. The ethics checklist was completed and approved before data collection, ensuring adherence to the principles of informed consent, participant confidentiality, and voluntary participation (Appendix 1).

## Implementation

The coaching sessions followed Jones and Williams' (2008) reflective practice model, emphasising continuous feedback and adaptation. This approach aligns with Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire's (2003) participatory action research principles, ensuring accurate engagement and responsiveness to participant needs.

## Participant selection and group formation

The study involved 30 MBA students in the Business Simulation with Professional Development module. Participants were divided into five competitive groups of six students each. This structure facilitated optimal group sizes for coaching effectiveness; individual attention within a collaborative setting; and dependable team dynamics mirroring business environments.

The selection process considered diverse professional backgrounds and experience levels to enhance authentic learning within each group.

## Intervention structure

The coaching intervention spanned six weeks, with weekly three-hour sessions designed to progressively build professional capabilities. Each session incorporated structured coaching activities aligned with realistic business challenges, facilitated discussion and feedback, individual reflection and goal-setting exercises, and progressive skill development activities.

This structure supported the development of authentic professional capabilities through structured coaching activities aligned with business challenges; meaningful dialogue and feedback; progressive skill development activities; and reflection and goal-setting exercises.

Throughout the project, the implementation process evolved, highlighting the complex and adaptive nature of action research. Student resistance to real engagement and the need to adapt coaching strategies to meet diverse needs added layers of complexity to the project. These challenges underscored the dynamic and iterative nature of action research, requiring flexibility and reflexivity in response to evolving circumstances.

In parallel with the implementation of the intervention, my own learning journey as a researcher also evolved through interactions with students, colleagues, and scholarly literature. Reflective practice played a central role in this process, allowing me to critically examine assumptions, refine approaches, and deepen my understanding of authentic coaching in educational contexts.

**Data collection methods**

This research employed a dynamic, reflective data collection process aligned with the iterative nature of action research, unlike traditional methods, where data collection is often static. This approach mirrors the iterative nature of the action research process itself, as noted by Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire (2003) and evidenced through continuous feedback and real-time observations, enabling adaptive responses to students' evolving needs (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Rather than relying solely on pre-established instruments like surveys and interviews, I continually engaged with participants, observed their reactions, and interacted throughout the intervention. This real-time feedback loop ensured that the data collection process remained responsive and adaptable to the evolving needs and circumstances of the participants and the research context (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005).

**Surveys:**

- Post-intervention surveys were administered to participants to collect quantitative data on their perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported learning outcomes related to authentic learning experiences.

- The survey included Likert-scale questions to assess participants' ability to authentically apply business concepts, engage with genuine business problems, and develop authentic professional competencies.

- Post-intervention surveys measured changes in participants' responses after completing the coaching sessions.

**Observations:**

- Observations were conducted during every coaching session to gather qualitative data on the authenticity of student engagement, the genuine application of business concepts, and the effectiveness of the coaching process.

- Observational data provided valuable insights into the implementation of the intervention, students' authentic participation, and any challenges encountered during the coaching sessions.

**Qualitative feedback:**

- Qualitative feedback was obtained from participants through open-ended questions included in the post-intervention surveys.

- Participants were encouraged to provide detailed feedback on their authentic learning experiences with the coaching intervention, including perceived benefits, challenges faced, and suggestions for improvement.

- Additionally, focus group discussions or individual interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to further explore their perspectives on the authenticity of their learning experiences.

**Document analysis:**

- Relevant documents, such as students' reflections, coaching session plans, and other instructional materials, were analysed to supplement the data collected through surveys, observations, and qualitative feedback.

- Document analysis provided additional context and insights into the authenticity of learning experiences and outcomes of the coaching intervention.

- This multi-method approach provided comprehensive insights into the impact of coaching on authentic learning experiences, allowing for triangulation of findings across different data

sources. Thus, the chosen data collection methods are well-supported by existing literature and align with the intervention's goals.

**Outcome and data analysis**

The analysis revealed compelling evidence of the transformative effect of personalised group coaching on student learning and professional development. By integrating structured coaching with experiential learning, the intervention fostered significant improvements in authentic engagement with business challenges; genuine application of theoretical concepts; and practical professional development.

**Quantitative insights**

The quantitative data from this research highlight substantial positive outcomes in practical student learning and engagement. Survey responses indicate that 85% of participants reported increased ability to authentically apply theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios following the coaching sessions. Students rated the coaching's effectiveness in enhancing their real-world understanding at 7.9 out of 10, reflecting strong perceived value. Additionally, the impact on experiential learning was notable, with students assigning an average rating of 8.9 out of 10 for improvements in their ability to engage genuinely with business challenges.

**Qualitative insights**

Observational data corroborate these findings, documenting a steady increase in authentic student interaction, critical thinking, and genuine decision making. As the coaching sessions progressed, students demonstrated greater authentic engagement, more nuanced analytical discussions, and a higher degree of genuine strategic reasoning in their simulation exercises. Moreover, 93% of participants stated that coaching played a vital role in helping them develop authentic professional capabilities within the course, reinforcing its role in fostering genuine professional development.

**Theme of 'authenticity'**

A key outcome of this study was the development of authentic learning experiences that transformed theoretical business

education into genuine professional preparation. Coaching sessions encouraged authentic dialogue, genuine problem solving, and real-world learning experiences, with students valuing the opportunity to engage with business concepts in ways that reflected actual professional practice. One participant remarked:

> "The coaching sessions created a space where we could genuinely engage with business problems rather than just completing academic exercises. This authentic approach made the learning feel relevant to our future careers".

The development of practical professional competencies emerged as another critical theme that emerged from the findings. Both quantitative scores and qualitative reflections suggest that students developed genuine professional capabilities, including the ability to authentically evaluate complex business scenarios and make strategic decisions with real-world applicability. The high enhancement score of 8.9 out of 10 for real-world application of business concepts reflects this genuine professional growth. One student articulated this transformation:

> "After several coaching sessions, I felt I was genuinely applying business theories rather than just memorising them. The regular authentic feedback helped me develop real professional judgment."

This development of authentic professional capabilities was particularly evident in the later stages of the intervention. Initially hesitant, students progressively became more genuinely engaged, demonstrating authentic professional behaviours and applying theoretical concepts in ways that reflected real-world business practice.

**Areas for improvement and future considerations**

Despite the overwhelmingly positive outcomes, the findings also highlight areas for further refinement. Some students expressed a desire for more authentic industry connections to reinforce the genuine applicability of their learning. Others suggested incorporating more diverse business scenarios to enhance the authenticity of the simulation experience. Furthermore, several participants recommended the inclusion of industry-specific case studies and real-world business scenarios within the simulations to enhance authentic professional preparation.

These insights provide valuable recommendations for future iterations of the coaching intervention. The findings suggest that expanding the authentic learning model to include industry mentorship could further enhance genuine professional development. Additionally, refining the applied learning strategies by incorporating more real-world business challenges, practice-based evaluation methods, and applied learning opportunities could amplify the impact of coaching sessions on genuine professional skill-building.

**Limitations**

The research was conducted with a single group at one institution. Self-reporting can introduce potential bias, and the outcomes of coaching may differ depending on the facilitator. Future studies could benefit from incorporating longitudinal data and comparisons across multiple sites. It is important for upcoming research to consider using multiple cohorts or cross-institutional studies to explore the scalability and adaptability of coaching interventions.

**Pedagogical implications for business education**

The findings offer valuable guidance for educators aiming to embed authentic learning in business curricula. The success of the coaching intervention underscores the importance of structured, student-centred support systems in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and authentic professional practice. The high levels of student engagement improved real-world application of business concepts, and the resulting enhanced genuine decision-making competencies highlight the potential for this approach to be adapted across various disciplines within business education.

Looking ahead, the evidence suggests that incorporating coaching methodologies as a core component of authentic learning curricula could enhance genuine professional skill development and create more engaged, capable, and career-ready graduates. By leveraging authenticity-driven learning strategies, educators can cultivate learning environments that empower students to navigate complex business landscapes with greater professional competence and genuine business acumen.

**The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning contribution**

This study offers significant contributions to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), particularly in understanding how

personalised coaching approaches enhance authentic learning in HE. It provides a replicable framework for embedding personalised coaching to support authentic engagement in business education. The study aligns with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (2015) by demonstrating how students learn effectively through authentic cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation within the coaching framework.

The success of this intervention provides empirical evidence for the value of integrating coaching methodologies into traditional teaching approaches. Specifically, the research shows that when students receive personalised guidance within an authentic learning environment, they develop stronger professional competencies and a greater ability to genuinely apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations.

The study also highlights the importance of creating learning environments that support practical professional development. The high levels of student engagement and improved learning outcomes suggest that this authentic approach could be adapted across different disciplines within HE, particularly in areas where genuine application of theoretical knowledge is crucial.

**Conclusion**

This action research project demonstrates the transformative potential of personalised group coaching in creating authentic business simulation learning. Through careful integration of coaching methodologies with experiential learning approaches, the intervention successfully enhanced students' industry-oriented growth and readiness, genuine application of business concepts, and meaningful student involvement with business challenges.

The findings align with current SoTL literature (Kolb, 2015; Slavich and Zimbardo, 2012) while offering new insights into the integration of coaching within authentic business education. As suggested by Bremner, Sakata, and Cameron (2022), the success of this intervention demonstrates the value of structured coaching support in enhancing experiential student learning outcomes.

The results reveal that structured coaching support can significantly impact students' ability to authentically apply theoretical concepts in practical contexts. The high levels of student satisfaction and improved learning outcomes suggest that this approach offers a

viable model for enhancing the authenticity of business education pedagogy.

Several forward-looking recommendations emerge from this research:

- Integrate regular coaching sessions within simulation-based learning environments as a standard approach to authentic pedagogy.
- Expand industry connections to further enhance the authenticity of learning experiences.
- Investigate digital coaching tools to supplement face-to-face interactions while maintaining authentic engagement.
- Explore cross-cultural adaptations of the coaching model for different authentic educational contexts.

As business education continues to evolve, the need for innovative approaches that bridge theory and practice through authentic learning becomes increasingly important. This study suggests that personalised group coaching offers a promising pathway for meeting this challenge while fostering the development of capable business professionals equipped with authentic, industry-relevant competencies.

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Sepideh is the author of the Tourist and Student Guide to Ukraine (2007) and has taught Persian, English, and Russian to diplomatic families. As a multilingual educator with diverse industry experience, she believes authentic higher education begins by valuing diverse perspectives and modelling reflective, practice-informed teaching that bridges theory with real-world application.

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# The transformative potential of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: evaluating its status as a threshold concept

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**Keywords:** *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), threshold concepts, positionality, identity, communities of practice.*

## Introduction

> Thresholds are the places where we can learn, where we can change our mind, where we can step into new identities (Meyer and Land, 2003).

The transformative potential of education is encapsulated through the lens of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Emerging as a pivotal area of inquiry in Higher Education (HE), SoTL systematically investigates teaching and learning to enhance educational practices (Huxham *et al.*, 2015). Central to this discourse is the idea of threshold concepts, defined by Meyer and Land (2003) as transformative ideas that fundamentally alter a learner's perception of a subject. This opinion piece critically examines whether SoTL qualifies as a threshold concept by exploring its defining characteristics and considering the implications of positionality, context, and inquiry within SoTL work. Furthermore, it engages with the SoTL grand challenges (Scharff *et al.*, 2023), particularly that of identification with SoTL, to deepen understanding of its transformative potential.

Threshold concepts are transformative, serving as gateways to deeper understanding within a discipline (Meyer and Land, 2006). They often induce a state of liminality, where learners confront confusion and uncertainty – integral components of the learning

process (Eady *et al.*, 2021). In the context of SoTL, engaging with its principles and methodologies can significantly challenge educators' assumptions regarding teaching effectiveness and student learning (Felten, 2013).

Threshold concepts possess five main characteristics: they are transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, and frequently troublesome (Meyer and Land, 2006). These attributes suggest that SoTL could function as a threshold concept. However, a debate emerges: do the complexities inherent in SoTL experiences and grand challenges make it a threshold concept that educators must navigate for meaningful pedagogical transformation (Scharff *et al.*, 2023)?

Proponents of the notion that SoTL is a threshold concept argue that engagement leads to substantial shifts in teaching practices and professional identity (Huber *et al.*, 2005; Simmons *et al.*, 2021). Through systematic investigations into learning, educators attain a nuanced understanding of their instructional methods, aligning with the transformative nature of threshold concepts. For instance, the adoption of evidence-based practices through SoTL compels educators to reassess their assumptions, resulting in significant changes in instructional strategies (Fanghanel, 2013). Research indicates that faculties that are engaged in SoTL report increased confidence in their teaching abilities and a heightened willingness to experiment with innovative pedagogical approaches (Felten, 2013).

The inquiry process intrinsic to SoTL fosters a cyclical relationship between action and reflection, crucial for grasping threshold concepts (Hubball *et al.*, 2013). This cycle could promote deeper learning and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement within educational institutions. Through SoTL, educators can transcend surface-level understandings, achieving a more integrated comprehension of their practice and experiencing the transformative nature characteristic of a threshold concept (Bernstein, 2013).

Conversely, some scholars (Chick, 2014; Bass, 2020) contend that SoTL may not fully meet the criteria of a threshold concept. Critics argue that the diverse range of inquiries and methodologies within SoTL complicates the identification of a singular, transformative idea. The variability in understanding and practising SoTL across different contexts may dilute its status as a threshold concept (Chick, 2014; Bass, 2020; Cook-Sather *et al.,* 2021).

The diversity inherent in SoTL practices suggests that educators may undergo varying degrees of transformation and recognise distinct processes (Gansemer-Topf *et al.*, 2022). For instance, the ways in which faculties in research-intensive institutions engage with SoTL may differ from their counterparts in teaching-focused colleges, raising questions about the universality required for defining SoTL as a threshold concept.

Moreover, threshold concepts should, ideally, be applicable across diverse contexts and disciplines (Meyer and Land, 2006). If SoTL is subject to varying interpretations and applications, its classification as a threshold concept becomes problematic (Knewstubb and Bond, 2009). While SoTL can inspire transformative change, it may not consistently function as a threshold concept for all educators.

Positionality emerges as a critical factor in this debate. Each educator's background, experiences, and values shape their understanding of teaching and learning, significantly influencing their engagement with SoTL. This positionality introduces subjectivity into the inquiry process as educators bring unique perspectives to their teaching practices (McKinney, 2006; Brookfield, 2017).

Recognising positionality is vital as it underscores the subjective nature of SoTL inquiries. Educators' identities – shaped by professional experiences, disciplinary backgrounds, and cultural contexts – affect how they interpret and engage with SoTL. For example, an educator primarily identifying as a researcher may approach SoTL differently from one who prioritises teaching (Simmons *et al.*, 2013).

Seen as the interplay between understanding and misunderstanding, SoTL complicates the argument for its classification as a threshold concept (Perkins, 2006; Manarin and Abrahamson, 2016). If SoTL is interpreted variably across contexts and experiences, the consensus required for it to be defined as a threshold concept is questioned. Consequently, the challenge of positionality raises critical considerations about how educators identify with SoTL and the implications for their teaching practices.

Context (Felten, 2013) significantly shapes the evaluation of SoTL as a threshold concept. Institutional culture, disciplinary norms, and educational practices influence the perception and implementation of SoTL. For instance, educators in research-intensive institutions

may confront different challenges and opportunities compared with those in teaching-focused environments. This variability raises questions about the consistency of transformative experiences associated with SoTL. Furthermore, institutional support is crucial in facilitating or hindering SoTL initiatives. Without recognition or resources for SoTL, educators may struggle to engage meaningfully with its principles, limiting the potential for transformation and suggesting that context profoundly affects whether SoTL functions as a threshold concept (Bernstein, 2013).

Cultural differences among educators and students further complicate the SoTL landscape. Educators from diverse backgrounds may adopt distinct approaches to teaching and learning that can influence their engagement with SoTL (Simmons *et al.*, 2021). This variability accentuates the need to consider context when assessing SoTL's potential as a threshold concept.

Establishing communities of practice is essential for promoting SoTL within HE institutions (Simmons *et al.*, 2013; Miller-Young *et al.*, 2018). Such communities foster collaboration among educators, enabling the sharing of insights, best practices, and challenges related to teaching and learning. Bernstein (2013) posits that SoTL practitioners can become invaluable assets to their institutions, acting as bridges between diverse knowledge bases and cultural perspectives. By engaging in collective SoTL inquiries, educators can leverage their unique identities to create richer, more inclusive educational environments. However, the formation of these communities is fraught with challenges. Identity significantly shapes participation within these groups (Miller-Young *et al.*, 2018). Identity is a multifaceted perception influenced by experiences, demographic characteristics, and social contexts. This complexity can lead to feelings of inclusion or exclusion. For instance, educators and students from under-represented backgrounds may feel marginalised in predominantly homogeneous communities, limiting their contributions and undermining the potential benefits of collaborative inquiry.

The challenge of identity in teaching and learning is particularly pertinent within communities of practice. Each member brings a unique identity to the dialogue, influencing how they interpret and respond to information. An educator's sense of efficacy can be shaped by student perceptions, which are often influenced by the identities of both parties. Understanding identity in the context of SoTL enhances engagement and impacts collective outcomes in educational practices.

Promoting awareness of identity dynamics within these communities can yield transformative experiences that enhance teaching and learning. By addressing identity-based assumptions and biases, educators can create more inclusive environments that foster open dialogue and diverse perspectives (Simmons *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, as communities of practice become more attuned to identity complexities, they can develop targeted strategies to ensure equitable participation, amplifying the benefits of SoTL.

Integrating diverse identities within communities of practice enriches SoTL, leading to a culture of inquiry responsive to the varied needs of students and educators alike (Scharff *et al.,* 2023). This collaborative approach not only strengthens the SoTL framework but also positions institutions as leaders in cultivating inclusive and effective teaching practices.

**Examining SoTL principles**

A closer examination of SoTL principles, as articulated by Felten (2013), reveals further dimensions to this debate. Felten identifies five principles: inquiry into learning, grounded in context, robust methods, partnerships, and public sharing. These principles reflect the complexity of SoTL and indicate that its application may vary widely among educators.

The principle of inquiry into learning aligns closely with the transformative nature of threshold concepts, highlighting the significance of reflective practice in enhancing teaching effectiveness. Engaging in inquiry allows for a critical assessment of teaching strategies and their impact on student learning, mirroring the transformative experiences described in threshold concepts.

The principle of being grounded in context underscores SoTL's situational nature. Educators must consider their environments when implementing SoTL practices as these contexts significantly influence outcomes. The necessity for robust methods ensures that SoTL inquiries are credible and meaningful; however, variability in methodologies across contexts may affect the universality of transformative experiences.

Partnerships (Healey *et al.*, 2019), another key principle, foster collaboration among educators and students, enriching the SoTL process. Sharing insights and practices through collaborative

inquiry can create a collective understanding of teaching and learning, potentially resulting in transformative experiences for all involved. Nevertheless, if partnerships are limited or unevenly distributed, the potential for transformation may not be realised equitably.

Finally, the principle of public sharing foregrounds the importance of disseminating SoTL findings to a broader audience (Bernstein, 2013; Felten, 2013). By sharing insights and best practices, educators contribute to the discourse on teaching and learning, potentially influencing their peers' perceptions and practices. This sharing can amplify SoTL's transformative nature; however, disparities in access to platforms for sharing may hinder its recognition as a threshold concept.

## Conclusion

The debate over whether SoTL qualifies as a threshold concept reveals a complex interplay between transformative potential, contextual variability, and identity influence. While engaging with SoTL can lead to significant shifts in teaching practices and educator identities, the diverse interpretations and applications of SoTL challenge the universality required for its classification as a threshold concept. Positionality and context underscore the multifaceted nature of identity in teaching and learning, emphasising the need for inclusive practices within communities of practice.

The future of SoTL in HE necessitates a rigorous engagement with its complexities and an emphasis on collaborative methodologies that enhance its transformative potential. This evolution demands a critical examination of both the challenges and benefits of SoTL, establishing it as a vital mechanism for pedagogical innovation. As the landscape of SoTL continues to shift, the pressing question arises: what new pathways will emerge in this dynamic environment? The exploration of these pathways will not only redefine the role of SoTL but will also reshape the broader educational experience, prompting a reimagining of how teaching and learning can fully empower all educators and learners. The implications of recognising SoTL as a threshold concept warrant careful consideration as they hold the potential to drive profound changes in educational practices and institutional cultures.

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# A reflection on the principles of learning styles

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**Keywords:** *Pedagogy, learning styles, visual learner, auditory, kinaesthetic*

## Introduction and context



The Core Content Framework (Department for Education (DFE), 2019) sets down the foundational knowledge that trainee teachers in England should acquire during their initial teacher education. In the 'adaptive teaching' section of this document, it states that:

> There is a common misconception that pupils have distinct and identifiable learning styles. This is not supported by evidence and attempting to tailor lessons to learning styles is unlikely to be beneficial (pp. 20–21).

This position presents a significant diversion from approaches to pedagogy in all age phases and contexts in the 1990s and 2000s, when identifying and catering to learners' preferred learning styles was recognised as good practice. In many cases, teachers would support students to identify themselves as either visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic learners (Dunn and Dunn, 1992; 1993) but this was just one of many categorisations. Indeed, Given and Reid (1999) inventoried over 100 different learning style instruments (for example, Gregorc's Mind Styles Delineator (1985), Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles Questionnaire (1992), Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (1999), Jackson's Learning Styles Profiler (2002) and Sternberg's Thinking Styles Inventory (1999) are among the most well-known). These varied in how learners were classified: some were linked to fixed elements of personality; others were, more flexibly, related to learner preference. However, they all, in some way, indicated that pedagogy would be made more effective

by diagnosing learning styles, encouraging learners to reflect on these styles in an age-appropriate way, and then designing teaching and learning activities around them. This paper revisits some of the underlying principles of learning styles and provides a reflection on their potential value to educators and learners by considering which of these elements are pedagogically impactful while acknowledging the limitations of learning styles as a whole.

**The critique of learning styles**

Following the initial popularity of learning styles, a concerted research-based critique resulted in a perspective shift, even while some texts continued to refer to learning styles positively (for example, Lever, 2011; Kamińska, 2014; Pritchard, 2014). Coffield *et al*. (2004), in undertaking a detailed inventory and analysis, critiqued the subjectivity of the self-diagnoses. They noted that instruments claimed to measure the learning styles qualitatively, when in reality, participants were making judgements on themselves that could not be compared or measured, based on their own interpretation of language-based test items, often without much thinking time (that is, 'choose the response that first comes into your mind'). The subjectivity of learning styles was, much later, also challenged by Papadatou-Pastou *et al*. (2021), who noted that these styles tended to be conceptualised differently by teachers, who would assess their learners differently and take different steps to implement learning styles pedagogy.

Following the work of Coffield *et al*. (2004), Pashler *et al*. (2008) conducted an extensive literature review of research regarding learning styles and found little empirical evidence supporting the value of employing this approach in the classroom. They argued that without separating children by learning style, then tracking how they were taught, and testing outcomes over an extended period, it would be difficult to conclude that teaching just according to the diagnosed style had value. Indeed, while learners of all ages will assert that they are a visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic learner, Pashler *et al*. (2008) found there to be few methodologically sound studies to credibly analyse and support this position. Riener and Willingham (2010) are similarly critical of the lack of supporting research around learning styles. They accept that learners may have preferences for how they are taught but argue that being taught just according to these preferences does not discernibly affect the outcome. They also suggest that these preferences are linked either to learners' existing abilities or to the context of the lesson. So, children who are already excelling in sport might say

that they would prefer kinaesthetic activities; or, when asked for their preferred learning style, learners may make a decision based on what the lesson is about, and might say visual for a geography lesson, or auditory for a music lesson.

It should be noted that, further to these critiques and those that followed (for example, Rohrer and Pashler, 2012; Cuevas, 2015; Newton and Miah, 2017), some empirical studies have been carried out. Rogowsky, Calhoun and Tallal conducted research with adults (2015), focusing on visual and auditory learners, then with children aged 10–11 (Rogowsky, Calhoun and Tallal, 2020), both adhering to the methodology suggested by Pashler et al. (2008). Neither study found a statistically significant positive impact on outcomes. Indeed, the research with children indicated that teaching solely to the preferred style might even have had a negative effect. Arbuthnott and Krätzig (2014), reviewing a range of research, concluded that teachers should avoid tailoring pedagogy to accommodate these learning styles but instead, employ approaches that have a stronger evidence base, such as retrieval practice and integrative elaboration; that is, linking new knowledge to existing knowledge. Of course, evidence-based pedagogies and strategies linked to learning styles are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

**Reflecting on the key principles of learning styles: Metacognition**

In Coffield et al.'s (2004) inventory, it is acknowledged that a knowledge of learning styles increases students' and teachers' understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, and characteristics as learners. This, in turn, makes both groups feel more confident. While it is clear that attempting to diagnose and then teach to specific, inflexible categories (such as visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic) is likely to be ineffective, there is great value in learners becoming more aware about their learning. This can include their strengths and areas for development but also, how they prefer to work and who with, what planning and recording methods are effective, and what motivates them. This focus should include the breadth of the curriculum so that learners think about how these elements may vary from subject to subject and topic to topic. Furthermore, discussions about learning need not be restricted to their own experiences, as learners benefit from talking to each other, making comparisons, and sharing strategies, approaches, and rationale. It is also important to note that metacognitive discussions should include the teacher, whose

pedagogy should be informed by the learners and their profiles, while also acknowledging their own prior experiences that inform the choices they make. Yan and Fralick (2022), in highlighting the flaws of a learning styles approach, noted that these metacognitive discussions do not happen frequently enough, and when they do, learners' self-reflections are often inaccurate. Of course, this is not a reason not to engage in these discussions, but it is a reminder that planning and practice is needed to make them impactful.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2021) identifies great value in learners developing and using metacognitive strategies. These include improving their knowledge of themselves as learners; planning for effective learning and then evaluating it; understanding the importance of activating prior knowledge and then building on this with purposeful practice; engaging in meaningful learner–learner and learner–teacher talk; and verbalising metacognitive thinking. The dialogic elements here are important because a critique of learning styles is around the element of subjective self-diagnosis. Of course, this is a diversion from the original learning styles premise, but these principles are closely aligned to one of the tenets of learning styles, those being for learners and teachers to work together closely to understand how to maximise the impact of lessons.

**Personalised learning**

One of the most persuasive arguments for the adoption of learning styles is that doing so prompts educators to be empathetic to the needs of their students and enables a more personalised approach to the needs of the learners. This features strongly in Kolb's (1999) Learning Styles Inventory and the Dunn and Dunn (1992; 1993) model but is also central to the whole premise of learning styles, which is that learners are different and that teachers need to understand how they are different and practise accordingly. There is no issue with this as a principle, of course; the DfE's (2015) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice is explicit that high quality, personalised learning will meet the needs of the majority of learners, and the Office for Students (2024) identifies personalised academic support as being central to equal opportunity in Higher Education (HE). This concept becomes restrictive when it is only seen through the context of three or four learning styles. For example, Whitley and Littleton (2000), while outlining how teacher education can be improved by the application of learning styles, discuss points such as giving verbal cues during visual presentations to support auditory learners,

using different colours to show different parts of the assignment for visual learners, and allowing kinaesthetic learners to use task cards or paper folding to engage in their learning. To be clear, these suggestions are not poor practice, and indeed, they may be helpful for some students in some lessons. The problem occurs when these choices are not, in fact, personalised, nor learner-led, but chosen by the teacher for certain students based on an assumption of a particular learning style, which itself has been identified subjectively, or when a particular learning style is used as a rationale for the teacher's own biases and intuitions (Yan and Fralick, 2022). Furthermore, personalisation can be much more creative than the examples noted (and to be fair to Whitley and Littleton (2000), their work does list further possibilities) but should involve meaningful conversations between teachers and students to understand what has been effective for them in the past, what they are experiencing now, and then, to agree what is needed next.

**Varying pedagogical approaches**

Reid's (2005) work outlines how learning styles can be applied to support inclusive teaching. The analysis discusses how, subject by subject, teachers can employ activities that meet the needs of visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learners. For example, in physical education, which would usually feature kinaesthetic work, learners can observe sequences or actions (visual) and then record them, or they can receive and give instructions just in auditory form. The rationale for this, Reid (2005) explains, is that learners will be more motivated and enjoy greater self-esteem because of a more balanced and differentiated approach. Teachers' pedagogy is similarly improved by a greater diversity, with examples matched to the learning styles in the class.

Given the revised view of learning styles, Reid's (2005) suggestions seem outdated. Trying to force all learning styles into the same lesson is unlikely to work well because learners must see that what they are being asked to do coheres with the aims of the lesson. Reid's (2005) approach is well-intentioned but too specific and may result in teachers 'crowbarring in' activities just to tick a particular learning style box. However, there are some valuable principles within the analysis that can be successfully adopted. The key is for teachers to consider what their subject, topic, or lesson could be. The physical education examples outlined previously, might, theoretically, present the subject in different ways but more importantly, are they relevant, interesting, and engaging? Physical education can, and should, include knowledge

and understanding of facts, skills, and behaviours; implementing discovery; problem solving; different methods of representation; a range of experiences; and learners having to think in different ways (Pickard and Maude, 2014). Educators should reflect on making their lessons diverse, certainly, but do so by exploiting everything that their subject or topic has to offer, rather than limiting it to a few learning styles.

**Flexible preferences**

Within the many learning styles models, some present the style as being part of a fixed personality type (for example, Jackson, 2002), and some are constitutionally based (for example, Gregorc, 1985). However, more relevant for this discussion are those who present learning styles as flexible, such as those put forth by Kolb (1999), Honey and Mumford (1992), and Allinson and Hayes (1996). Kolb, for example, reviewing his inventory, updated the instrument to measure the way that individuals adapt to respond to different situations. The implication from this and the other similar models is that learners may not just be one style and that this may develop over time and based on context. While the idea of moving between, for example, visual and auditory learning styles would now be unsupported based on current understandings, the concept of learners being flexible in how they work is coherent. We would not expect learners to tackle different subjects and topics in the same way, nor would we expect learners to apply the same strategies to different tasks. Indeed, as effective pedagogues, we should recognise this by ensuring students have opportunities to be active, practise using oracy, learn by doing, and work collaboratively, and moreover, by providing opportunities for students to engage in their assignments flexibly.

**Conclusion**

Despite ideas about pedagogy continuing to evolve, there is no likelihood of a return to the full adoption of learning styles that was common in the 1990s and 2000s, and nor should there be, based on the lack of empirical evidence supporting it initially and the subsequent research that led to its discrediting. However, the limitations of the theory do not mean that all its elements lack value. At the height of the implementation of learning styles, pedagogues in all contexts would have spent time considering what to do to support their auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic learners in a day, lesson, or lecture, because they presumed that was necessary for learning to be effective. Many of those decisions taken at that

time would have been effective, even if the theory behind them was not correct, because teachers personalising learning, working flexibly and creatively, and valuing metacognition have value. If teachers prize these elements, part of learning styles, though not the main drivers, when making pedagogical choices, then the outcome is likely to be positive.

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# Developing students' authentic selves: Community organising modules at the University of Westminster, United Kingdom

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**Keywords:** *Higher Education; authentic learning; critical service-learning; vertically integrated projects; community organising.*

## Introduction

This short update introduces a suite of community organising modules that are being delivered at the University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom (UK). These modules have been developed in partnership with Citizens UK and take inspiration from existing initiatives to embed community organising within the curriculum at other UK universities (see, for example, Anglia Ruskin University (n.d.), Newcastle University (2024) and University of Sussex (2024). Citizens UK are 'the UK's biggest, most diverse, and most effective people-powered alliance' who engage in community organising activity with the aim of 'bringing together everyday people and local organisations to build a better, fairer society' (Citizens UK, 2024). The modules aim to provide a deeply authentic learning experience for students. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they allow students the opportunity to develop authentic relationships and their authentic selves during their time at university.

## A critical service-learning approach

The modules employ a critical service-learning approach. In general, service-learning is 'an educational approach that combines learning objectives with community service to provide a practical, progressive learning experience while meeting societal needs' (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), 2023). Sometimes referred to within UK Higher Education (HE) as 'engaged learning' and 'community-based learning', service-learning has emerged in recent years as a powerful way of providing authentic learning opportunities for university students. For our current purposes, 'authentic learning' is defined as learning that is experiential, active, and applied, rather than abstract and theoretical (Pitchford, Owen and Stevens, 2022). Originally developed in the United States, service-learning is, increasingly, being integrated into the curricula of UK HE providers as part of a broader drive towards greater public engagement on the part of universities that also incorporates knowledge exchange, public engagement with research, and social and civic responsibility more generally (NCCPE, 2023). Critical service-learning is a type of service-learning that 'stresses change within both the community and student' and is, therefore, 'explicitly political and social justice oriented and possesses a focus on critical reflection that enables both students and communities to act as agents of change' (Pitchford, Owen and Stevens, 2022, p. 81). These characteristics align with the strategic objectives of both the University of Westminster and Citizens UK.

## Authentic learning at the University of Westminster

The modules outlined above respond to a broader institutional agenda at the University of Westminster, whose current Education Strategy (University of Westminster, 2023) sets out a commitment to providing students with opportunities for authentic learning. The strategy builds on the definition provided above by characterising authentic learning as 'episodes where learning is planned and structured with the intention of enabling students and colleagues to deploy their understanding and capabilities for the benefit of others' (University of Westminster, 2023, p.10). The modules are situated within a broader set of authentic and service-learning initiatives at the university, such as a student-led legal advice clinic and live projects on several business courses where students work on briefs provided by external partners. These initiatives aim to ensure that students play an active role in constructing knowledge rather than being passive recipients of it. This type of learning allows

students to have agency in their educational experience.

**Module design**

The community organising modules are offered at three levels. There is a Level 4 module called 'Introduction to Community Organising', a Level 5 module called 'Community Organising and Collective Action', and a Level 6 module called 'Community Organising and Leadership'. All are 20-credit modules. The Level 5 and Level 6 modules are year-long while the Level 4 module runs during the second (spring) semester. These 'elective' modules are part of a menu of institution-wide options for undergraduate students (see University of Westminster, 2024). Elective modules are defined as 'credit-bearing modules that will provide you with the opportunity to expand your professional skills and career development. They provide an opportunity to broaden your curriculum and might be in a different subject area from your main course of study' (University of Westminster, 2024).

The community organising modules are delivered as a Vertically Integrated Project (VIP). VIPs are 'a transformative approach to enhancing HE by engaging undergraduate and graduate students in ambitious, long-term, large-scale, multidisciplinary project teams that are led by faculty' (Coyle, 2019). The structure of VIPs is innovative, often running counter to traditional, modular, single level, classroom-based delivery and the expectations of students and staff for modules to be delivered in this way. For example, VIPs often involve students from different levels of study and different courses working together on projects and being present during the same learning episodes. The University of Strathclyde is notable for having established VIPs for a Sustainable Development education programme (University of Strathclyde, 2024). For our project, the VIP structure facilitates the inter-year student collaboration that engages learners in concepts and processes associated with community organising and can involve field visits, contributions to community events, and working within external community organisations.

The innovative structure of VIPs presented us with several challenges within the designing and implementation phase of the project. These challenges ranged from conceptual issues surrounding what teaching and learning should look like when adopting the VIP model, through to more practical matters such as timetabling the modules when we did not require a classroom every week. We have sought to address these challenges through the

curriculum design process, treating the Levels 4, 5, and 6 modules almost as a mini course, rather than as three stand-alone modules. It quickly became clear that attempting to develop the modules in isolation from one another was impractical. However, while coordinating the development of the modules, we realised that, although some students do attend at all levels, some engage with a community organising module at one level only. This means that the design must facilitate both a continuous developmental learning process for those students who attend iterations at different levels of the module while also offering a unique learning experience should a student attend at only one level.

To help address these issues, we adopted the 'ABC approach' to curriculum development in the creation of the module designs. This is an iterative, hands-on, storyboarding approach that allowed us to map the student learning journey across the three modules (Young and Perovic, 2024). We found this enabled us to integrate and build on the existing course content developed by Citizens UK while also considering the learning environment at the University of Westminster, and how students would engage with the modules at each level. It also enabled us to consider the different learning contexts and how students would interact with each other across different academic levels and within the project. This required a clear understanding of what is expected of the students on the different modules, how they interact, and the specific learning outcomes of each.

One of the conceptual challenges within the design process was ensuring that learning outcomes were constructed and assessed at an appropriate level for the different cohorts. This is, necessarily, more complex for VIP modules where students from different levels can be present in the same learning episode. For example, a key Level 6 learning outcome states that students completing the module will be able to 'lead and enhance the performance of teams engaged in community-organising activities'. This learning outcome is assessed by asking students to critically evaluate their experience of leadership within the module. By contrast, a key Level 4 learning outcome states that students completing the module will be able to 'apply team working and networking skills in an unfamiliar setting, making effective contributions to community projects and campaigns'. This learning outcome is assessed by asking students to produce a portfolio reflecting on their experiences of working in a team in a community setting.

While there is, by design, an overlap akin to a Venn diagram between the modules, it is within this space, working together, that the students will construct and develop their learning towards the outcomes of the level they are undertaking. While we have identified challenges within the design process so far, it is clear that new and interesting pedagogical and teaching challenges will emerge through the delivery going forward and we will continue to learn alongside the students undertaking the modules and the partner organisations we are working with.

## The experience so far

The modules ran for the first time during the 2024/25 academic year (though the Level 5 module did not run due to low enrolment) and at the time of writing, we are nearing the end of the first semester. So far, students have been introduced to some of the key concepts and methodologies of community organising and learned about the Citizens UK 'Five Steps to Social Change' methodology (see Figure 1). Through interactive workshops, students have had the opportunity to practise some of the key methods and tools of community organising including storytelling, listening, and negotiating. Bringing the theory to life, all classroom-based teaching has been based around real stories of wins by Citizens UK community leaders across the UK, illustrating how social change is possible when people come together.

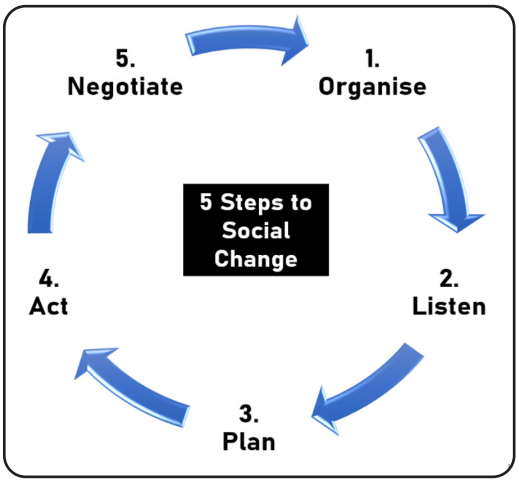


**Figure 1.** Five steps to social change (Citizens UK, 2024)

We have now entered the next stage of the module, which involves students planning, taking part in, and evaluating real cycles of action aimed at tackling social injustice – the first one focusing on the Living Wage. On 20 November 2024, supported by community leaders from the local Citizens Alliance and Living Wage Campaign (Citizens UK, 2024b), students conducted a very

successful research listening action. This involved walking around the area local to the University's Cavendish campus in Fitzrovia, London, and going into local businesses (pubs, cafes, retail shops, hotels – and even the BBC!) to talk to workers about their experiences of working in central London. The aim of this listening action was to gather information about pay and working conditions in the area and make connections with local workers. Students gathered information about around 25 local businesses and heard some compelling stories from workers on low pay who must work exceptionally long hours to make ends meet. This information and these stories will, in turn, be used to plan the next step in our cycle of action – a public action, during which students will hand letters to selected businesses asking them to consider accrediting as Living Wage employers.

**Reflections on authenticity**

Taking students out of the classroom and giving them the opportunity to participate in real-life campaigns for social change, the community organising modules clearly provide examples of authentic learning that is experiential, active, and applied. Undoubtedly, students are also learning practical skills in leadership, organising, and storytelling (to name a few) that will stand them in good stead for whatever careers they may embark on after university. From a perspective that sees authentic learning as synonymous with skills development and employability, these modules tick all the boxes.

On a more profound level, though, the community organising modules offer students the opportunity to develop their authentic selves in the context of more authentic relationships (with other students, with lecturers, with the wider community) than those usually experienced within the neoliberal university. Not only do students get to meet people they would not normally engage with within the university walls, but a core aspect of the module has also been to encourage students to reflect on, and practise telling, their own stories. What experiences do they bring with them? What have they learned? How do their own stories shape their involvement and inspire them to create change? Through telling their own stories and reflecting on their own interests, students learn how to connect with others based on shared interests and how to build the relational power that community organising thrives on. We have already heard some powerful stories from students about how their own experiences of social injustice inspired them to choose the module, and through the recent listening action, they were able

to draw on these experiences to connect with workers in the local area.

Over the course of the academic year, students will experience, first-hand, the challenges, obstacles, and frustrations of campaigns alongside the joy, elation, and hope that can be born out of working together with our neighbours to tackle social problems. Through this experience of living in, and being a key driver for, these campaigns, students will also be able to question the work they are doing. Is this the right route to create change? What is the best methodology for building power? Will we win? Each campaign will be unpredictable – we cannot say in advance if we will win or get to the negotiating table (the two key aims of community organising). What we can ensure is that students are 'learning through doing' and have space for growth through evaluation and supported development. Our overall aim is that by the end of the modules, students will feel empowered to lead collective action for social change in their communities and beyond. We look forward to exploring, in future publications, the extent to which this has happened.

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# Teaching and becoming an activist in a 'plausible genocide': a reflection on (in)authenticity

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**Keywords:** *Teaching, activism, authenticity, reflective practice*

## Starting points



Frida Berrigan, an anti-nuclear activist, describes a classroom experiment to help her students embrace their curiosity and fear about nuclear weapons (2024). She dresses up as Oppenheimer (the theoretical physicist who developed the atom bomb in the 1940s), takes them through an imaginative exercise in which their own town is targeted by a nuclear weapon, and shows a You Tube clip (Outrider Foundation, 2019, cited in Berrigan, 2024) about how to dismantle a nuclear bomb. This corresponds to accounts of authenticity in teaching and learning that highlight four key dimensions: being oneself, pedagogical relationships, contestation, and enactment of ultimate meaning (Ramezanzadeh *et al*., 2017).

In the autumn term of 2023/24, multiple strands of my life coincided. I am still trying to understand their full significance for my whole self as human, teacher, researcher, and London-based activist. This article explores the theme of authenticity as I taught and led a new module called 'Becoming an activist' at the same time as witnessing the 'plausible genocide' (International Court of Justice, 2024) in Gaza, blogging about the impact of the genocide on my Gazan family, and attending regular marches and campaign events that protested the violence in Gaza while working on a research project into reflective practice for volunteering in small charities. **Appendix 1** captures these parallel processes.

I use three critical tools to explore this experience. First, Fals Borda's concept of 'sentipensar' (2001) argues that the integration

of rationality and feelings is central to the search for authenticity. Second, I consider the dichotomised and categorised 'insider/outsider' debate around positionality (Jabiri, 2024). Third, I use Dewey's concept of 'worry or wonder' (1938), which situates learning within moments of anxiety and discomfort, forcing me to embrace my experience in Autumn 2023 as a learning moment. This update unpacks my first-person experience through the four dimensions of authenticity.

Let me be clear here, while the focus of this paper is to reflect on my experience of (in)authenticity in teaching, I want to put at its heart the genocidal moment Palestinians are living through. I use language such as 'anxieties' to describe my experience of teaching at this time but do this acknowledging that words have become almost inadequate to describe the emotions and realities of Palestinians.

I came across the concept of 'sentipensar' at a conference in June last year. I had that 'aha!' moment, in which my experience of teaching the new first-year undergraduate module 'Becoming an activist', Oct–Dec 2023, took on a recognisable meaning. I had designed the new module over the previous year to fulfil several functions. First, it needed to hit the University of East London (UEL) institutional descriptors and competencies for students on the two undergraduate courses, 'Sustainable development and social change' and 'Politics and international relations'. Second, it needed to contribute to efforts to close the awarding gap by using what I had learned in anti-racism training. Third, it had to grab the attention and interest of new students from Day One of their studies at UEL, mapping onto the issues they feel passionate and angry about, and thereby, improving retention. These institutional imperatives and performance indicators were juxtaposed, throughout the three months of delivery, with my own emotions of distress and vicarious trauma as I witnessed the physical destruction of Gaza by the Israeli army. Gaza was the place where I had worked, found love, got married, and maintained deep connections with over the last 25 years. But beyond the physical destruction, was the metaphorical handcuffing of all things related to Gaza and Palestinians. This has been the case since Israel's 1967 occupation of the Gaza 'Strip' and extends to the idea of Gaza as a metaphor for terror, resistance, poverty, and destitution (Tawil-Souri and Matar, 2016). Said described this as a 'disciplinary communications apparatus' (1984, p. 15) in which Palestinians are stereotyped as either antisemitic or terrorists. To claim to be close to Gaza has risk attached.

When designing the module, 'Becoming an activist', as outlined above, I had focused on the need to centre the student experience. Themes covered by the module include: 'The definition of activism', 'Who are the activists?', 'Personal values and activism', and 'Civil society and activism'. In the class on 'Who are the activists?', we discuss student and academic activism. By Week 2 of the module (11 October 2023), I realised that I was inextricably bound up in the process of 'becoming an activist' along with my students. A colleague, Afaf Jabiri, captures the problematic binary often used by researchers as a methodological starting point, mirroring my dilemma as I taught. This article is situated within this contestation, outlined here:

> the rigidity of the insider/outsider dynamic and the inflexibility arising from how 'Western' knowledge production processes ask one to maintain objectivity and, therefore, replicate the power dynamics between the self and Other (Jabiri, 2024, p. 79).

These were moments of extreme disquiet as I tried to navigate the classroom experience each Wednesday morning for all of us, frequently fresh from a family conversation about what area of Gaza had been hit overnight in relation to where family members were. A useful reflective tool to support the unpicking of this process is Dewey's theory, which ascribes our best learning to moments of 'worry or wonder' (1938). We are encouraged, by Dewey, to squeeze maximum learning from moments of worry, wonder or unease and ask ourselves what has caused this moment. Can we name it? Could we have done things differently? This model of reflective practice has become central to a resource I was developing at this time to inspire and sustain volunteering, especially among our students (Pickering-Saqqa, 2025). I use it here in attempting to draw some pedagogical learning from events with wider significance for our humanity.

To examine moments of (in)authenticity in teaching and learning across the three months of 'Becoming an activist', I highlight examples from the chronology set out in **Appendix 1**. This places alongside each other the teaching schedule and weekly pre-session recommended activities in the Module Guide (finalised 25 September 2023), my personal experiences and activities, and those of my Gaza family, visually conveying the totality of my experience.

## Being oneself

Research on authenticity concludes that there are four significant dimensions to how teachers and students experience authenticity in the classroom (Ramezanzadeh *et al*., 2017). The first element is identified as 'being oneself', in which teachers become aware of their own possibilities and take responsibility for their actions. In Week 3, I arrived at UEL to begin co-leading a seminar and became alarmingly aware of the possibility that my emotions would prevent me from teaching instead of the integration of rationality and feelings that 'sentipensar' encourages. As I approached the classroom, my co-tutor gave me a hug in acknowledgment of that night's news – a direct Israeli strike on Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza City. What made me try to hold back the tears? In retrospect, I think it was the prospect of losing the 'objectivity' Jabiri refers to (2024). But by doing so, I closed down an opportunity to reflect with the class on activism and positionality and rendered invisible the very issue that motivated my own activism at the time. This could have been an important learning moment for all of us. Instead, I moved into a seminar on UEL's Career Development Pathway and submitted to the power dynamics that drive institutional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and can mitigate against authentic teaching and learning. That evening at home, I drafted my first blog post, titled 'How to 'be' in a genocide' (My Family and Other Passports, 2023a), in which I wrote:

> These are dark days. What to say? How to 'be'? At what point can we ever say we have done enough to prevent the slide into the latter stages of genocide?

I have never shared this post with my students, nor the other four blog posts I wrote about Gaza while teaching 'Becoming an activist' (Fijil40, 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2023e).

Responding to Dewey's provocation of what we could have done differently (1938), I have made my own positionality as a person in the process of 'becoming an activist' in this space much more explicit in my teaching of the module in 2024. However, it is clear to me that this would not have been possible in 2023 in the context of vicarious trauma that kept me in parallel binary worlds, 'inside' and 'outside' of teaching.

## Pedagogical relationships

The pedagogical relationships that construct the reality of

the classroom are the next element of authenticity within Ramezanzadeh et al.'s four-part framework (2017). The combinations of relationships between student, teacher, and subject matter include, for example, the teacher's relationship with the subject matter and the students' relationship with the teacher's relationship with the subject matter. On reflection, the cautiousness, or indeed, nervousness with which I approached these relationships in 2023 was appropriate for a first-year undergraduate class taught in Term 1 when students are also nervous and vulnerable. I was able to pace and scaffold the relationship between myself and the subject matter in a way that built trust with the students.

Conversations about attendance at marches against the military assault on Gaza began very naturally from Week 4 when the theme of the class was 'activism in the context of an authoritarian state'. This was the time when the, then, United Kingdom (UK) Home Secretary openly considered banning marches and the flying of the Palestinian flag. By the time we visited 'Islamic relief' in Week 6, and were discussing how our personal values motivated us, the students' relationship with my relationship with the subject matter was one of respect and openness. At this point in the term, they were able to appreciate the learning journey they were on, and the scaffolds intentionally built into the module to support them. This was exemplified in a conversation with a student during Week 7. She was interested in the power of digital activism and realised that, as a dancer, she had a considerable following on TikTok. She asked if I would be happy to look through a new TikTok resource she had started to design to help her followers understand what was happening in Gaza. We then discussed the challenges of explaining the geography of Palestinian territory under Israeli military occupation, such as Gaza and the West Bank, in ways that were accurate and would engage a largely United States-based youth audience (her TikTok followers) and I was able to make some practical suggestions around use of terminology. What, for example, was the 'West Bank'? West of where?

**Contestation**

The ability to challenge oneself and contest the system and policy context within which we operate is the third dimension of authenticity. The significance of contestation in this model of authenticity is what initially drew me to it as it recognises the tensions always inherent in teaching. It helps this reflection around a period of heightened contestation in which I needed to

stay true to my own values, care for myself professionally and psychologically, care for my students, and protect and support my family within a hostile policy environment.

A significant element of the struggle to achieve sentipensar's integration of rationality and feelings was UEL's 2021 adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism (UEL, 2021). Evidence from research into the lived experience of UK universities that have adopted this definition, points to a 'chilling effect' on freedom of speech as those working in Higher Education navigate the conflation of antisemitism with criticism of Israel's policies and ideology (Al Ghifari Lukman et al., 2021). I felt this acutely on 8 October 2023, when I was preparing for the class on 'Who are the activists?'.

The purpose of the above topic was to enable students to see themselves and their passions in the definition of 'activist', so we wanted to discuss examples of student activism and academic activism. In June 2023, I drew up an action plan after attending a UEL anti-racist pedagogy event, building on an ecological approach to anti-racism (Botticello and Caffrey, 2021). The plan, which I wanted to implement through this module as an early intervention in addressing the course awarding gap, included getting to know each other as a group, and specifically, including the work of thinkers in the global majority world. I selected Said's 'Orientalism' (1978) and Rodney's 'How Europe underdeveloped Africa' (1969) as examples and included the following quote from Rodney, 'By what standard of morality can the violence used by a slave to break his chains be considered the same as the violence of a slave master?' (1969, p. 22).

Before finalising the material for this class, I asked a colleague if he would check through my slides and let me know if there was anything problematic about them. He quickly confirmed that all was fine, in his view. However, my actions demonstrate the power of the metaphorical handcuffing in which anything related to Palestinians is always subject to securitisation. This policy context was further emphasised by the UEL Vice Chancellor and President's statement on 18 October, to the whole university, about the 7 October attacks, in which we were all reminded about the legal limits of free speech (UEL, 2023). Thus, contestation with myself and the wider policy context became core to teaching this module.

**Ultimate meaning**

The final dimension of authenticity is the connection between our teaching and our search for ultimate meaning beyond the classroom. Two weeks were significant for me in my process of becoming and discovering myself as an activist. In Week 7, I ran a class about corporate activism and was in the comfort zone of a case study from my doctoral research. This gave me the freedom and 'permission' to refer, specifically, to the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign and signpost to the Palestine teach-in event that afternoon. The significance of this first teach-in event on campus was to test the level of interest among students and colleagues, and the free speech environment of UEL. Its success on both levels enabled me to envision the space for activism around Palestinian rights at UEL and have the confidence to see my role in this. My visit to family in Turkey over the next few days reinforced my sense of priorities and what mattered most to me. This sense of purpose motivated me to write two blogs in Week 9 and begin an experimental Twitter/X campaign in support of a ceasefire using the hashtag 'pets4palestine'.

By Week 10, students were also identifying the issues and values that mattered to them. Module feedback noted they were learning to step out of their comfort zone and confront social issues while encouraging their desire to work for social change. Final week group presentations, for example, focused on campaigns such as Gandhi's salt march, 'Black Lives Matter' and 'CeaseFireNow'. The centrality of relationships to them also became clear in their feedback as they worked to build their teamwork skills, enjoyed working with like-minded people and learned to communicate effectively and persuasively.

This reflection on the challenging first iteration of the 'Becoming an activist' module has led me to the following conclusions. First, next time round, an explicit understanding that we are all 'becoming activists' together needs to be a Week 1 outcome for all students. Second, I experienced barriers to authenticity in my teaching. Reflecting on this three-month period reveals the extent to which the parallel tracks of my life coalesced around the ongoing genocide in Gaza. My feelings of extreme distress and despair led to insufficient integration of these emotions with the rationality demands of teaching. This blocked me from 'being myself' while, at the same time, allowing time for my relationship with the class to become established. Third, the wider policy environment, especially the chilling effect of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and

securitisation narratives around Palestinians, also constrained my ability to 'be myself'. However, these areas of contestation provided a real-time activism moment for me. Where I became more comfortable with drawing from my own experience and engaging with the genocide as a focus for a class on activism, strong pedagogical relationships of trust and hope emerged. Finally, together with students, the module became a source of hope and meaningful action for me as I searched for a way of responding to the genocidal moment.

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## Appendix 1: Teaching 'Becoming an activist', 2023

| Week & Date | Theme | Pre-session activity | Personal experience | Gaza family experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 / 4 Oct | What is Activism? | Read this short article. Noor, D. (2023) https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/aug/14/montana-climate-trial-young-activists-judge-order | 8/10 Wonder about Walter Rodney quote in images The Groundings with my Brothers. Checked with colleague on appropriacy of slides for Week2. | All "borders" closed. Brother-in-law stuck in Jerusalem unable to leave house or get to see mother and sister in Ramallah. 9/10 Order from Israeli of all residents of Gaza's Rimal district to evacuate. Discussions whether other brother-in-law in Gaza leave the home in Gaza City? |
| 2 / 11 Oct | Who are the "activists"? | Read this short article. Robins-Early, N. (2023) https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/aug/21/artificial-intelligence-culture-war-woke-far-right | 11/10 PalMusic dinner 13/10 Write to MP re family. 14/10 set up folder "Nakba 2.0 2023". 15/10 took 16 screen shots of Gaza City. Accessed Cabinet papers and identified "Gaza Border Experience" on google maps. 14/10 1st London March for Gaza + visit Barbican ex on Women & Climate Activism | 13/10 Family ordered to leave their homes in Gaza City and flee south of the Gaza Strip. 13/10 Messages with niece "Catastrophic" |
| 3 / 18 Oct | What is to be done? | Read the Springer (2016) article in the reading list below. | 19/10 https://fijil40.wordpress.com/2023/10/19/how-to-be-in-a-genocide/ 21/10 London March for Gaza | 17/10 Attack on Al Ahli Hospital |
| 4 / 25 Oct | Activism in the context of the authoritarian state: Should we break the law? | Read the Glasius (2018) article in the reading list below. | 28/10 London March for Gaza | 28/10 Israeli invasion begins. |
| 5 / 1 Nov | Activism and civil society: Can NGOs make a difference? | Read Ch.2 (pp. 45-59) of Freire (1972), Pedagogy of the Oppressed or listen to it here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMsC9fbPbD8 | 1/11 https://fijil40.wordpress.com/2023/11/01/love-letter-to-gaza/ 4/11 London March & Charing X sit-in for Gaza 6/11 Write to MP re relative & Rafah | 2/11 Siege of Gaza City begins where most family live. 5/11 Niece tells us her Dad is "beyond terrified for his life". He has already left his family home in Gaza City, and we believe that home was destroyed today. His neighbours are currently missing under the rubble of their own home. Relatives killed in home in Gaza City. More killed while searching in rubble for them. UK Embassy in Israel tell cousin (in London) that parents cannot be on UK list to cross Rafah as he is not with them. |

## Appendix 1: Teaching 'Becoming an activist', 2023

| Week & Date | Theme | Pre-session activity | Personal experience | Gaza family experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6<br>8 Nov | Activism and personal values: What do you want to change? Visit to Islamic Relief & World Vision | Do the exercises on p.33 of Cottrell (2021) – your core text. | 9/11<br>https://fijil40.wordpress.com/2023/11/09/stones-or-ideas/<br>14/11 Write to Member of Parliament to vote for ceasefire | 8/11 Destruction of El-Saqqa House & family Facebook post.<br>14/11 Al-Shifa Hospital in central Gaza City raided by Israeli forces.<br>Relatives move south to Khan Younes. |
| 7<br>15 Nov | Working with corporate sector: partnerships and networks | Watch this short clip on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and debate the questions on the Moodle Forum https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohrkhZnG4Ww | 15/11 Organised Palestine Teach in<br>16/11 Fly to Istanbul to be with sister-in-law for a few days. No one sleeps. | |
| 8<br>22 Nov | Activism and accountability: when things go wrong | Read Amnesty International's Code of Conduct for Activists & take the short survey on Moodle https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/activist-code-conduct | 25/11 London March for Gaza | |
| 9<br>29 Nov | Planning and evidencing impact | Watch this clip on How to turn protest into powerful change https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_g1BMVFcuw | 30/11<br>https://fijil40.wordpress.com/2023/11/30/hanging-by-threads/<br>https://fijil40.wordpress.com/2023/11/30/earl-grey-every-day/<br>3/12 #Pets4Palestine begins | Temporary pause in Gaza for hostage release. Pause reveals destruction of Rashad Shawa Cultural Centre where I organised many events, 1994-1996.<br>Nephew in Madrid and wife contact Spanish govt for help with Dad's exit from Gaza.<br>Nephew in Istanbul arranges for e-sims & water deliveries to his Dad in Khan Younes.<br>1/12 end of "pause" and military action resumes. |
| 10<br>6 Dec | Digital activism | Read Ozkula (2021) article. | 9/12 London March for Gaza | Relatives move further south to Rafah after more Israeli evacuation orders. Travel with mattress and papers only. Manage to rent a room in a house. 1 million people now in Rafah.<br>Daily scanning of lists for those exiting Gaza via Rafah to understand how and who to connect with. |

## Appendix 1: Teaching ‘Becoming an activist’, 2023

| Week & Date | Theme | Pre-session activity | Personal experience | Gaza family experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11<br>13 Dec | Environmental activism | Read these 2 short articles and compare their approach.<br>https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/aug/02/anti-protest-laws-and-culture-wars-weakening-uks-democracy-finds-report<br>https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11985439/XR-fanatics-try-hold-Britain-ransom-Eco-activists-threaten-step-stunts.html | | Daily discussions about who can exit Gaza, how and cost.<br>15/12 Attack on Rafah begins |
| 12<br>20 Dec | Presentations and conclusions | Watch this for top tips on working and presenting as a team https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_GRHmJjcTi0 | | |

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# Developing pedagogies of compassion: policy, principles, and practice

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**Keywords:** *Compassionate pedagogy, intelligent compassion, intelligent action, practice-based knowledge, higher education policy*

## Introduction: background and higher education policy context

This article focuses on what might be called the 'compassion turn' in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), evolving as an antidote to the damaging effects of over four decades of toxic, neoliberal higher education (HE) policy (Pedersen, 2021; Smyth, 2017). Work by Gibbs (2017) and Waddington (2021) led to the recent edited collection: *Developing pedagogies of compassion in Higher Education: a practice first approach* (Waddington and Bonaparte, 2024), which addresses intersections and gaps between practice, theory, and research that both connect and divide compassion and pedagogies. This article presents an overview of core themes that need to be woven into a new HE policy narrative, and principles of a 'practice first' approach that will enable pedagogies of compassion to develop and flourish. It offers a significant contribution to understanding the need for compassion in twenty-first century universities, while simultaneously understanding the harsh HE landscape, and the need to disrupt this in ways that Killam (2023, p. 35) suggests:

> Offering compassion as a throughline of inquiry, I wonder if/how it is possible for compassion to disrupt neoliberalism through the precarity of individual and systemic enaction. … Can/does compassion create

> breeches [*sic*] for new possibilities?

The neoliberal push towards individualism presents an opportunity for compassion to rebuild a path to communities of practice first laid down by Lave and Wenger (1991). Core themes that need to be woven into a new HE policy narrative to develop and support critical pedagogies of compassion are: (i) belonging; (ii) caring; (iii) emotion; (iv) respect; (v) kindness; and (vi) human relationships (for example, see Blake, Capper and Jackson, 2022; Bovill, 2020; Unwin, 2018). These HE policy themes are explored in more depth in Haroun (2024), which illustrates a narrative approach to practising compassion, and Waddington and Bonaparte (2024), which offers a creative collection of essays on compassionate practices including classical Eastern philosophies and the neuroscience of compassion.

The overarching aim and direction of the compassion turn in is to integrate a wide range of interdisciplinary, theoretical, and professional perspectives and create new ways in which compassion can be a guiding ethos for a different form of university and campus. Additionally, and perhaps more feasibly, it asks how compassion can become contagious in current organisational structures. A core assumption is that students benefit from faculty members who find meaning in their work and who have compassion for others. This requires a predominantly practical approach to building compassionate pedagogies and praxis based on the experiences of practitioners and students as co-creators and co-researchers (for example, Bovill, 2020; Waddington and Bonaparte, 2022).

The Latin root for the word compassion is *pati*, which means ‘to suffer’, and the prefix, ‘com’ means ‘with’, thus the linguistic origin of compassion literally means ‘to suffer with’. Compassion is embodied in recognising the suffering of others, considering the seriousness of it, and having the intent to do something about it. However, it is not pity, which has potentially patronising outcomes, and a risk of projecting unwanted and unnecessary thoughts and feelings onto that other person. Compassion requires the participation of the other person, which Hoggett (2009, p. 147) calls ‘intelligent compassion whereby one can feel the pain and think critically about the injustice, thereby fusing an ethic of care to an ethic of justice’. In essence, intelligent compassion should lead to intelligent action.

Intelligent compassion also requires us to think critically about the language of compassion and suffering when used in an HE context. Such language can, potentially, reinforce stereotypes and hierarchical dynamics of power that hinder genuine understanding of student experiences and assumptions around learning and teaching. In the realm of HE, where fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment is crucial, it is essential to examine the limitations of using such language and reshape it in a manner that promotes inclusivity, empowerment, and authenticity. We need to question whether students want to be seen as suffering – as victims. We need to ask, 'What does/should compassion in the classroom and other (formal and informal) spaces of learning and teaching look and feel like?' This is critical compassion, as there is a danger that uncritical compassion fosters, within the privileged, actions of problem-solving and advocacy on behalf of 'the suffering'.

The terms 'pedagogy of compassion' and 'compassionate pedagogy' can be used in practice in both singular and plural forms. Zembylas (2017, p. 183), for example, used the term 'critical and strategic pedagogies of compassion' to describe pedagogies that engage educators and students in critical interrogation of the intersections between power, praxis, and emotion. While Gibbs' (2017) collection, *The pedagogy of compassion at the heart of higher education*, can be used as an overarching philosophical and moral position, based on the principles that compassion: (i) is founded on the dignity and limitations of humanity; (ii) is universal – it is for, and with, everybody and must be given unconditionally; and (iii) inevitably expresses itself in the fight for justice. The related term 'compassionate pedagogy' draws on Waddington and Bonaparte's (2022) research into compassionate pedagogical practice with undergraduate psychology students as co-researchers, which resulted in the following definition:

> Recognising and noticing the difference, discrimination, and bias in how people are being treated, how students are learning and being taught, and the compassionate actions – both strategic and small – that we all need to take to promote and support student and staff wellbeing. (p. 14)

The above student-co-created definition reflects the principles of a 'practice first' approach, which is addressed next.

**Principles of a 'practice first' approach**

Haroun (2021, p. 113) coined the term 'practice first approach', arguing that:

> Compassion cannot be understood purely as a theoretical concept. To truly grasp it, we need to understand it in a lived and embodied way so that we can notice when it's missing and have the skills and attributes to practice it actively.

Compassion is often talked about from an individual perspective, situated within the concept of behaviour. Cohn (2014) criticises 'health' behaviour as being overly simplistic because it excludes the social, affective, material, and interrelation aspects of human activity. If we replace the concept of 'health' with 'compassion' regarding behaviours, this could lead to a narrow understanding of compassion that is situated solely within the individual. Cohn goes on to argue that if we think about these concepts from a practice perspective, there is a broadening that becomes more inclusive of specific contexts and is influenced by a variety of social and material factors. The term 'practice' offers resistance to the individualising assumptions of behaviour, emphasising the importance of agency and the socio-cultural context.

If we situate compassionate practice within the collective – rather than focusing on individualist understanding of the concept – we are more likely to address the structural challenges that cause suffering in the first place. This can be achieved in a number of ways; for example, by developing compassionate communities of practice (see Parsons *et al*., 2019), and/or embedding compassion into existing communities of practice. From a research perspective, Witkin (2016) contends that practice should be the primary context of knowledge generation since it is where such knowledge will be applied. He goes on to argue that practitioner-based research need not conform to the protocols of conventional research, and emphasis should be on how critically reflective practitioners learn from their practice, and how they transform information into knowledge and make it actionable. This is particularly relevant to our argument that intelligent compassion should lead to intelligent action. But first, we need to cultivate the conditions for pedagogies of compassion to flourish. To do this, the ground needs to be cleared, and new pathways laid. When making a pathway in the 'real world' there are two key questions to consider: 'What will be its purpose?' and, 'Will the land on which it is laid match that purpose

or can it be restructured?'.

The metaphorical point is that the current neoliberal HE landscape is not fit for purpose. Hierarchal compassionate practice needs to be flattened to create an inclusive and equitable landscape that enables us to recognise and notice difference, discrimination, and bias in how people are treated and how students are learning and being taught. This will pave the way for the compassionate actions – both strategic and small – that we all need to take to promote and support student and staff wellbeing.

The themes of belonging, caring, emotion, kindness, respect, and human relationships that are interwoven into the policy narrative in Waddington and Bonaparte (2024) can also be seen as seeds that need to be cultivated and grown in our universities. Godfrey, Larkin-Wells and Jordan (2024, p. 78) encourage us to see seeds not as a metaphor but as a symbol: 'Symbols express and represent meaning. Meaning helps provide an understanding in the lives of human beings'. Taking belonging as an example, Ahn and Davis (2020) contend that for many students, a sense of belonging is essential to their engagement, academic success, self-confidence, mental health, and wellbeing. We contend that the 'seed of belonging' should be nurtured further to embody a sense of companionship and 'mattering' in relation to compassion, which can be extended to both students and staff. When we feel that we matter, and when we create spaces where others matter, this links to belonging but in a more inclusive way.

For Nancy Kline (2020), one of the components of a thinking environment (which is what universities are) is a place that says to people 'you matter', and that people think at their best when they notice that the environment in which they are thinking also reflects a sense that 'you matter'. This can be reflected in timely responses to email, remembering and using students' first/preferred names, and for students to feel valued as individuals with unique identities and experiences (Bonaparte, 2024). Jordan and Schwartz (2018, p. 28) advance the notion of 'intellectual mattering', which is 'when we tell our students that their thinking or their questions have sparked our interest, deepened our learning, inspired us, or, in some other way, contributed to our lives as teachers'. This, they argue, can offset feelings of 'un-belonging' and defensiveness arising as a consequence of earlier educational experiences of failure, public humiliation, and shame.

Action learning is also a way of nurturing pedagogies of compassion and self-compassion (Nowlan, 2021) and is a powerful method for developing critical thinking, problem solving, creative solutions, and innovative practice (Action Learning Associates, 2024). Revans (2011) used the term 'comrades in adversity' to describe ways that action learning groups help and support each other to understand and take action to tackle the problems that each member is facing. Although SoTL is making significant progress in the compassion turn in HE, there are still some harsh realities and adversities to be faced. The move towards compassion in our universities requires a radical shift to address external pressures of marketisation, staff and student welfare and wellbeing, and the climate crisis. This requires hope without illusion, and hope that is anchored in practice, leading to us to ask, do we now need to be 'comrades in compassion'?

To conclude, in writing this piece, we have reflected on the language of compassion, the appropriateness of notions of suffering to describe students' experiences, and the importance of intelligent compassion and intelligent action. Belonging and companionship have emerged as key concepts, and rather than using the language of adversity, do we, perhaps, need, instead, to be talking in terms of 'companions in compassion'? It might be argued that the term 'comrade' has political, militaristic, and specifically masculine associations, while the term 'companion' is gender neutral, and has kinder associations with someone who is a friend, ally, or partner in compassion. Yet, critical compassion is also political, especially as we move towards developing pedagogies of compassion, and move away from neoliberal notions of universities as 'academic factories'. Therefore, we conclude with a question:

Are we now engaged in a battle for shaping the soul of HE and universities of the future?

We will leave it for readers to reflect on this question, and consider where, why, and how they position themselves on the comrade-to-companion continuum of compassion!

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