Editorial 7 (SI1): Kindness in higher education: Fostering the human(e) element of teaching and learning

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Introduction

The seeds of inspiration for this JALT Special Issue focussing on Kindness in Higher Education began some years back within the Kaplan Australia and New Zealand organisation where human flourishing is highly valued by the Executive and management teams. Across the organisation, leaders have partnered with the Kindness Factory in Australia, an organisation led by Kath Koschel (2023), who advocates that kindness is the key to human connection. As a learning organisation, human flourishing and connection is a key value that drives the Kaplan business units and underpins its commitment to student-centric and human-responsive educational endeavours.

In 2020, a Kaplan higher education symposium invited academic staff to explore the integration of kindness, human flourishing, and higher education learning through the works of Garrison (2007; 2017). The Garrison Inquiry Framework (2007; 2017) was deemed to be an apt tool as a lens to delve deeper into the higher education agenda, particularly during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, as it was specifically designed to create a community of learners "where students are fully engaged in collaboratively constructing meaningful and worthwhile knowledge" (Garrison, 2006, p. 25).

The model (Garrison, 2007, 2017) was also designed to critique learning in higher education and was useful in positioning academic discussions through the interplay of three perspectives: (a) teaching presence that shapes the educational process of learning, (b) cognitive presence that invites the collaborative construction of knowledge through inquiry learning, and (c) social presence or the capacity to connect as a community through learning including staff and students, both professionally and personally (Aspland & Fox, 2022).

Social connections and dialogical communication amongst educators and students on both a personal and a professional dimension were also important foci for the academics attending the symposium, and these concepts were embedded in Garrison's social presence. This was and remains particularly important in a time when disconnections are highly plausible and present in the daily work of teachers.

Cognitive presence has been central to a range of real concerns in the dynamic context of higher education during the 2020 to 2024 period, particularly in reconstituting circumstances where the impact of generative artificial intelligence is reshaping academic work in ways not yet imagined.

Teaching presence in its newly evolving forms continues to be the key responsibility of teaching academics, designed to achieve designated learning outcomes but also to generate positive student engagement, student satisfaction and a sense of community (Garrison, 2007). These themes dominated the professional conversations throughout a series of symposia conducted since 2020 and have led to the generation of insightful publications that critique "the daunting challenge(s)" (Garrison, 2007, p. 26) which educators continue to face today, including those published in an earlier JALT edition (Volume 5, Number 2, 2022).

What we have witnessed as academics within Kaplan and across many higher education institutions is that the sustained engagement of the vibrant education community of academics nationally and globally can be enhanced through a strong community of practice, the introduction of new learning frameworks, the introduction of innovative pedagogical practices, and critical conversations that are central to the interplay of teaching, cognitive, and social presences (Garrison, 2006). The present JALT Special Issue provides testimony to this observation, as can be witnessed

in each of the papers presented forthwith.

However, also of significance here is that within the complexities and dimensions of the interplay of teaching, cognitive, and social presences, a component of kindness is identifiable that has sustained the academic and student communities throughout the years, and it has generated a deep sense of connectedness amongst staff and the leaders of educational innovations in higher education in response to the challenges of new times. Amidst a global higher education context of uncertainty and, at times, trauma, the papers that follow provide insights into a growing community of academics electing to facilitate the power of kindness to address the unique challenges that students and staff alike are confronted with as they strive to achieve high-quality learning outcomes for all.

Overview of issue 7 (SI1)

The first article by Aspland and Fox reports on a systematic review that delves into the growing scholarly interest in kindness, particularly its relevance within higher education. Despite its popularity, the concept of kindness remains ambiguously defined in academic literature. This review aims to bridge this gap by proposing a research agenda to guide future inquiries. Key findings include the identification of 13 themes related to kindness in higher education, with a predominant focus on kindness pedagogy and its beneficial influence on both student and educator experiences.

Transitioning from the research landscape of kindness, the following articles in this issue offer more specific insights into how students perceive and experience kindness within their educational settings. A large-scale survey situated in Southern Nigeria, reported by Ambe et al., investigates the critical role of social and cognitive presence from the perspective of fourth-year education-major students. Their research reveals a robust correlation between social presence, academic success, cognitive presence, and critical thinking. Findings indicate that advancing social connections and cognitive engagement significantly improves students' overall educational experiences, thereby highlighting the importance of embracing these elements into teaching practices.

Extending the attention from students to educators, the next article authored by Jaber Kamali and his team portrays teachers' perspectives on effective language teaching components within a supportive CoI framework. Their thematic analysis of the interview data collected from local teachers in Iran identifies nine sub-themes encompassing teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence. Essential insights underscore the significance of classroom dynamics, critical thinking, and positive relationships in promoting effective teaching. These findings contribute to assisting educators and policymakers in refining teaching strategies and curricula.

Regarding the role of kindness in learning and teaching, the contributions involved in this special edition do not only seek to address 'what do they think of it' but also attempt to discover 'how can they implement it'. Three articles share the same interest in presenting innovative pedagogical approaches that incorporate kindness into educational practices. Teakel et al. evaluate the impact of embedded tutors trained in a pedagogy of kindness on university first-year students. The tutors provided individualised support, emphasising empathy and academic integrity. Their results demonstrate a remarkable reduction in academic misconduct and enhanced student performance, particularly among at-risk students. This study underscores the efficacy of integrating kindness into tutoring practices to foster student success and ethical behaviour.

Further exploring the theme of pedagogical kindness, Kelland et al. discuss the theoretical underpinnings of a student-led, service-learning course that is designed to humanise the learning environment and nurture ethical development and its applications in a South African university. The proposed course, 'IiNtetho zoBomi', concentrates on the integration of ethical considerations into tertiary education and promotes student autonomy and social responsibility. This article illustrates how a humanising pedagogy can transform educational experiences and address broader societal issues.

In alignment with these innovative implementations, the final research article exemplifies how technology and care can be harmoniously integrated into teacher education. Jones et al. present a unique approach to initial teacher education through the adoption of a caring HyFlex pedagogy. Their model combines face-to-face and online learning, stressing interpersonal rapport and flexible delivery to support regional students in Australia. The study highlights the significance of care in educational practices and demonstrates how technology can be leveraged to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. Their example of practice shows positive outcomes for student engagement and success, especially in regional communities.

Complementing these research articles, the interview contributed by Vojinovikj et al. (2024) depicts strategic perspectives on the implementation of kindness at an institutional level. As the Academic Dean of Kaplan Business School (KBS), one of the most reputable teaching-focused institutions in Australia whose student-centric pedagogy has been globally acknowledged, Professor James Adonopoulos elucidates KBS's commitment to kindness and student-centricity. This interview provides valuable insights into how higher education institutions can cultivate an academic culture of care and support in relation to teaching and learning, curriculum design and development, student support and engagement, and leadership and continuous improvement, thereby creating a more compassionate and effective educational landscape.

Concluding remarks

This special edition presents a comprehensive exploration of kindness in higher education, beginning with Aspland and Fox's systematic review, which identifies key themes and proposes a future research agenda. The subsequent articles provide in-depth analyses of both students' and educators' perspectives, emphasising the critical roles of

social and cognitive presence in enhancing educational outcomes. Collectively, these contributions underscore the transformative power of kindness in creating inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments, offering valuable guidance for educators, policymakers, and institutions aiming to enhance the educational landscape.

Future research should focus on several key areas. Longitudinal studies are essential to investigate the long-term impacts of kindness on students and educators, providing insight into its enduring benefits and challenges. Understanding how kindness initiatives affect the mental well-being of students and staff is also crucial, as this will provide valuable data to inform and improve mental health support strategies within educational settings. Additionally, interdisciplinary research integrating insights from psychology, sociology, and education is necessary to comprehend the broader impacts of kindness and its intersection with various aspects of educational environments.

By addressing these areas, future research can deepen our understanding of kindness in higher education, offering robust evidence to support its integration into educational practices and policies. This, in turn, will foster more compassionate, inclusive, and effective learning environments, ultimately enhancing the overall educational experience for both students and educators.

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