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Leading a curriculum design of care through courage in knowledge and action

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Abstract

This paper explores what happens when you set out to lead a caring curriculum program design in a range of international contexts over several years with the premise of a shared vision. Through a single composite case approach, we have captured the essence of our learnings by combining our individual accounts of eleven programs across a range of contexts to form a single composite case which sought to capture the macro-, meso-, and micro- factors at play. Employing collaborative autoethnography (CAE) and a metaphorical, three-dimensional personal narrative inquiry framework, the data (as moments and reflections recounted) emerged through close analyses of the experiences of two senior education leaders. We identified in our data the three themes as described in the literature: curriculum, leadership and care. A further sub-theme revealed that we, as leaders, care for others. However, while we enacted transrelational leadership, we were thwarted in our goal at all levels of the system. The study tells the story of how, where and why we failed. Rather than experiencing failure as a source of shame and avoiding it, we grew from the lessons learned. Key to our findings is the creation of the term "curriculum of care in higher education". This idea is new to curriculum design discourse in higher education. It is defined as advocating for an environment where we are all included, supported, belong and feel safe, brave and care for each other. There is a commitment to asking 'what happened to you?' What is integral is the nature of academics' and students' agency in their work.

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Introduction

Learning leaders in higher education (HE) recognise the super complexities of current times (Barnett, 2020) and they know that learning is enacted through the relationships that happen through the interactions of members within HE communities “[T]hese processes are authentically human in nature and cannot be reduced to mechanical, technical or clinical intentions” (Branson & Mara, 2019, p. 92). Pinar (1975), in his seminal work, recognised the importance of relations noting that curriculum design often requires learning leaders to facilitate complicated conversations, whilst navigating a myriad of “structural-agentic processes” (Annala et al., 2021). In this complex space, one expectation that is gaining ground in academic peer-reviewed and grey literature is the need for academics to have their wellbeing recognised by their leaders (McClure, 2025). Research has shown that contemporary leaders need to engage in the emotional wellbeing of their followers, referred to as the “affective turn” (see Munro & Thanem, 2018; Renault & Tarakci, 2023). A model of leadership in higher education that clearly aligns with these critical concerns is transrelational leadership. At “its essence is a relationship that seeks to create a culture based upon ... shared values of trust, openness, transparency, honesty, integrity, collegiality and ethicalness” (Branson & Mara, 2019, p. 94).

It is also of critical importance that educational leaders understand and are agile in navigating the influence of neoliberal corporatism (Wooltorton et al., 2025) and the forces of geopolitics shaping our individual and collective futures. The core business of universities is to ensure that students successfully grow and meet the requirements of their chosen program in order to flourish, not only for their personal and professional benefit and welfare but also for a country to reach its social and economic goals. Given the volatile state of the world, we thought as educational leaders, it timely to consider our context as foci of “troubling”, allowing us as reflective practitioners to access “the understandings which have been implicit in his [sic] action, understandings which he [sic] surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action” (Schön, 1983, p. 50). Agile leaders are those who are creative, rather than reactive (Hensellek, 2020). Grant (2021), whilst not discussing HE leaders specifically, posits that agile leaders need to adopt an evidenced-based approach, an approach which is a celebrated practice in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Program review and curriculum design is an expectation for contemporary academics, especially program coordinators and those in positional leadership (Krause, 2023). The theoretical underpinnings driving program review are “curriculum inquiry” (Burt & Hubball, 2014, p. 203) and the need for “professional learning conversations” (Earl & Timperley, 2009). This naturally lends itself to an SOTL approach where exchanges and reflections around composite program review are shared by those in the review process. We thus set out to explore:

- 1) What happens when you set out to lead a caring curriculum program design with the premise of a shared vision?
- 2) What are the macro-, meso-, and micro-organisational factors at play?

Literature review

Curriculum conceptualisation and reconceptualisation are influenced by multiple factors (Krause, 2023) especially the outcome of a neoliberal corporate frame (Wooltorton et al., 2025). Individual academics working in universities across different parts of the world, have embraced these paradigms while simultaneously holding other ones that their own practice identifies. We as academics in HE have the opportunity to lean in with our own personal theoretical and philosophical frameworks (Krause, 2023). Krause (2023), in her thoughtful and “practical guide” to “learner-centred leadership in higher education,” lists some important fundamentals that underpin successful curriculum leadership. Key amongst these is “intentionality and an informed understanding of the power and purpose of curriculum in your context” (p. 119).

Curriculum in context

Drawing on organisational behaviour theory (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017), social research units of analysis (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019; Smith et al., 2006) and Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory, we illuminate the complexity of current organisations, including HE organisations, by proposing a three-level framework for understanding the organisation - micro, meso and macro. At the micro level is the individual level of activity and the relationships within it. The meso refers to the school (faculty) and the curriculum, and the macro refers to the university – the executive, the institution. We chose this framework because it can represent the complexity in which leadership is now recognised to operate within.

Power and purpose of care

This paper aims to bring the issue of care for curriculum to academic consciousness. In doing so, we draw specifically on the seminal literature of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1997; 1998); feminist ethics of care (Noddings, 2002), and political ethics of care (Collins, 2025; Tronto, 1993, 2013), acknowledging that these principal references have evoked ongoing conversation that brings them to contemporary attention. We also draw on Australian indigenous care ethics through kaartdjin bidi, an [I]ntergenerational learning of Noongar kaartdjin, pedagogies involv[ing] responsibilities for care of people, place and knowledge in temporal and spatial worlds, enabling the continuity of deep relationships (Wooltorton et al., 2025, p. 14). In an "ethics of care" approach to HE, we also draw on an African ethic of ubuntu caring; emancipatory, humanising and politico-pedagogical act (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

A critical pedagogical approach aims to empower learners and educators to become active and engaged citizens who can challenge social inequality and injustice (Freire, 1998). The key question is "How shall we live well together?" (Strike, 2007, p. 19). Like Noddings (2015) and others, we argue that education is grounded in relationships between the carer and the cared for, with its focus on how teachers and leaders can create caring relationships through "modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation" (p. 237). Noddings (2012) asserts that a caring connection is ethically important to humanity, and thus the relationship in which people engage in a caring manner is key. Zeivots and colleagues (2024) identified that co-design of curriculum in HE can be relational and transformative. Acknowledging that Indigenous and feminist care ethics probe into deep connections and moral commitments between humans and nonhumans is also important in curriculum design that is caring. Indigenous ethics highlight attentive caring for the intertwined needs of humans and "nonhumans within interdependent communities. Feminist environmental care ethics emphasise the importance of empowering communities to care for themselves and the social and ecological communities in which their lives and interests are interwoven" (Whyte & Cuomo, 2017, p.234).

As Australian academics, we are committed to Noongar kaartdjin bidi which means knowledge path and is a metaphor for connecting people, place and time (Wooltorton et al., 2022). Through such connection, "we celebrate values and ethics of care, creativity, narrative, lived experience, the collective, justice, ways of responding to sentient, animate places ... [and] attend to notions of non-linear time" (Poelina et al., 2022, p. 2). In this process of an international community of learning leaders, we looked for an ethical theory that marries with the above. Ubuntu caring also celebrates interconnectedness (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). Ubuntu is an African philosophical idea of shared humanity where human beings are interdependent on one another. Ubuntu caring permeates all aspects of life, extending beyond human relationships to embrace our connection with nature and the spiritual world. It manifests in relationality, community, respect, fellowship and compassion (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019) and as a result, we obtain a sense of belonging in the world (Hallen, 2016). In the same way, Collins (2025) proposes a care-ethical approach where responsibility derives from the inevitable fact of human interdependency. This responsibility calls upon each of us to perform contextually embedded and open-ended actions of care. Care is enacted in the networks of social relations that each of us inhabits, rather than in the individual alone. Care is decidedly not concerned with individual aims, desires, or ambitions; and it is not possible as an "I" "but only as a "we" (Jacobs, 2005). For Tronto (1993), an ethic of care is an approach to personal, social, moral, and political life that starts from the reality that all human beings need and receive care and give care to others. The care relationships among humans are part of what makes us human and as such, we are interdependent beings. Tronto (1993) purports that care is political and that it extends to the more-than-human existence.

It is a democratic process where all stakeholders make decisions about the allocation of the labour of care.

There is a discourse on using the terminology curriculum of care. Although the concept of care is not new to the literature of pedagogy, the term "curriculum of care" only appears to have been first used in 2004 by Watson in a webpage article describing a Year Two classroom involved in a child development improvement project. The "mission is to help teachers create caring classrooms [through] comprehensive educational programs that focus on ways to help schools foster students' social, emotional, and moral, as well as intellectual, development (no page)". A further search failed to find any other references, although "care curriculum" is used by Maddock et al. (2019) from Monash University, for example when they describe the syllabus for medicine, nursing and health science students, which is person-centred care. The kindness curriculum has also started to gain interest post-COVID, influenced by the Kindness Factory (Koschel, 2023). Kaplan Business School, for example, has embedded graduate attributes pertaining to kindness (Vojinovij et al., 2024).

Leadership in higher education

To enact such a curriculum of care, now more than ever, we need caring and compassionate learning leaders in HE (McClure, 2025) because when academics are well, they are better at supporting their students and their communities (Brewster et al., 2022). Learning leaders in HE do not rely on positional leadership roles, but rather, they lead by recognising and acting on opportunities to exert influence, often independent of formal managerial positions or roles. Branson et al. (2018) drew on the basic leadership practices of Haslam et al. (2011) and applied these to HE. It describes leadership as essentially a transrelational phenomenon: a leadership style focused on attending to relationships across the different structures within the institution, leading to work not just being done, but so that the group grows and improves its practices. They describe such a leader as someone who is an "authentic member of the group they are leading; championing the group; changing the groups' identity; and bringing the external relevant influences to the attention of the group." (Branson et al., 2018, p. 19-21). In turn, the group adopts the leader who then decides to use all available theories, strategies and resources best suited to their needs (Branson & Mara, 2019). As such, a relational leader is competent, confident and empathetic and has the "capacity to generate knowledge and truth in a cooperative, relational manner" (p. 97). Such a leader seeks to create a culture that is inclusive, where diversity is celebrated and where a wide skill set is employed and heard, creating an environment where people can not only be well, but thrive and flourish physically, socially and emotionally. One could posit that such leadership by its very nature is more likely to be generative and inspire the agility to enable adaptive responses. Brown (2018) concurs, defining a leader as anyone who is courageous enough to take responsibility for identifying and mentoring the people who mentor. They need the essential attributes: "the ability to be courageous, wholehearted, vulnerable, and joyful." (Della-Latta & Burkett, 2021, p. 163).

Returning to the literature that reviews the key concept of agility, it identifies the required shift in leadership characteristics to operate primarily in the creative space rather than the reactive one. An agile approach to leadership that is lean and dynamic. Having reduced the hegemonic tendencies of the bureaucracies, it facilitates faster decision-making and innovation leading to improved efficiencies and effectiveness, but it is still reflective. For Prasongko and Adianto (2019), agile leadership involves four components: interconnection, information transparency, technical assistance and decentralised decisions. As such, a leader leading with agility guides the team, continuously influences team behaviour by defining, disseminating and sustaining a guiding vision. Further, as previously identified, Wooltorton et al. (2025) draw our attention to the argument that students of HE are not only faced with a polycrisis, but that HE is actually part of the cause of the problem. The authors suggest that learning leaders are those who can focus on agile leadership and who can exercise self-awareness and build their own and others' leadership capacity. According to Edmondson (2021), the changes emanating from the post-COVID era have created a new paradigm shift for universities where the ensuing "chaos" will "separate the agile from the fragile" (p. 2). Underlying this approach is the capacity to be responsive in uncertain situations and to be able to respond appropriately when opportunities are birthed from these circumstances (Scott, 2023). Karakose et al. (2022) note that agile leaders are most effective when serving as partners, that is, as servant leaders (Greenleaf, 2002) to teams, rather than when teams serve them. Although the concept of servant leadership is not new among both academics and practitioners, it continues to receive considerable focus due to the fact that it can positively impact individual and collective outcomes (Canavesi & Mi-nelli, 2022).

Unlike the more recent work of Zeivots et al. (2024) who focused on a codesign team of course coordinators, educational developers and learning designers, we are interested in how the leaders acted and learned in curriculum design experiences. This is an unexplored area, but essential given that all curriculum design needs a leader to initiate and see a project to its end (Krause, 2023).

Method

This study employs collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang et al., 2016) to analyse our experiences of program design closely using a composite case approach (see Duffy, 2010; Willis, 2019). Autoethnography (AE) is a research approach in which the researcher calls upon their own experiences and undertakes "an ethnographic analysis of the cultural context and implications of that experience" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 589). It does not ask the researchers to step-back from their position and look in, instead the researcher is clearly invested in the sense making process: (auto), with depth, a critical reflexivity and mindfulness of the nature and risk of introspection; ethno (critically addressing wider cultures and social groups), and graphy (sophisticated analysis, representational sense) (Grant, 2024). Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a social version of AE. It involves "researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their socio-cultural contexts" (Chang et al., 2016, p. 17). CAE then is about being self- and collectively reflexive, being critically reflective about assumptions and employing new concepts if the current ones have failed (Grant, 2024, p. 6). Two or more authors focus on a phenomenon of inquiry from the perspective of self through a concurrent or sequential systemic research approach that typically combines the perspectives, findings, and conclusions in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). "Researchers use the tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography ... [and] retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1-2). Using CAE processes, the researcher participants move back and forward between experience and examining a vulnerable self while also observing and revealing the broader context of that experience. Making sense of the experience for self and others recognises the relational ties to cultural members.

As a reflexive genre of writing, CAE situates the self within the context of a culture, sub-culture or group, and studies one's experience along with that of other members of the group. It is therefore a personal style of research characterised by "confessional tales" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740) that do not usually figure in more conventional styles of academic writing. CAE therefore has no pretence of objectivity. The researchers' lived experiences become the object of investigation, as they are "fully committed to and immersed" in the groups they study. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741).

This methodology emphasises the importance of reflection as a basis for continued learning, and one that makes perfect sense for the scholarship of teaching and learning because:

[R]eflection is the meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understandings of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible (Rodgers, 2002, p. 845).

Adapting Willis's (2019) composite narratives, this study uses a composite case approach where data from several individual projects, with over ten years of our lived experience, is used to tell a single story. The data were collected from state, national, and international projects over a ten-year period (2013 – 2023). Lauren's programs included: Master Education, Early Childhood Education B-12, Master Education (Inclusive Education), Master Education (TESOL), and Master Education (Global Leadership). Kathie's included Bachelor Personal Development Health Physical Education, Bachelor Health Science (Fitness), Bachelor Sports Business, and Graduate Certificate Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

We have utilised a metaphorical three-dimensional personal narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin, 2006) framed by a Deweyan theory of experience, and thus we draw upon Dewey's criteria of continuity, interaction and situation. The framework's three dimensions are the personal and social (interaction) along one dimension; past, present and future (continuity) along a second dimension; place (situation) along a third dimension Clandin-

-in & Connelly, 2000). The initial stories were written separately and saved in a shared document, and these stories were then combined into one story. We also met bi-monthly or monthly for 1.5 hours over Teams for eighteen months to discuss our findings and subsequent learnings. Initially, by colour coding our stories, we identified text (data) that we broadly grouped into categories. The categories were subsequently grouped into a smaller number of themes in line with what the literature identified as pertinent to contemporary HE leadership: curriculum, leadership, and care. Any questions whether a text had a better fit with another theme were resolved through discussion.

This process of analysing the data led to our initial ideas and thoughts about the impact of care, vulnerability and compassion on curriculum design and pedagogies, leadership practices and drove the desire to investigate further. The initial analysis also served as a reflective space, helping us to think about what kinds of prompts would elicit deeper and more specific reflections about the impact of macro, meso, and micro influences and organisational factors on program design processes and outcomes.

During the thematic analysis, we were also open to the possibility of the generation of other additional themes. The theme of care was further developed into care for self and care for others. As a result of this process, our final themes evolved into curriculum, transrelational and agile leadership and care of others. The themes were then analysed according to the ecosystem: macro (the university), meso (the school), micro (individual). It was here that we saw additional themes arise.

We come to this work as privileged, white women and mothers in somewhat different professional roles: Kathie as a senior academic developer, pedagogist and researcher. Kathie is a woman from a Second World War migrant family and an Anglo-Celtic convict ancestry who grew up in Dharug Country. She now lives in Whadjuk Boodjar which is my "Heart Land". She is the first in her family to go to university and believes "You must be the change you wish to see in the world" - Mahatma Gandhi. Like Whitlam (1974) and Freire (1997), she believes that education is a social good with the potential to be transformative. Kathie is embarking on a life-long journey, learning about Indigenous knowledges and indigenising the curriculum. Lauren is an Australian woman of Anglo-Celtic ancestry who was born in Broken Hill, NSW and who grew up on Gadigal Country. For much of her adult life, she has lived and worked across the globe and has come to call the Middle East home for over 25 years. She returned to Australia as a mid-career academic, believing a great intellectual community should look and be like the world, advocating for placing social justice at the heart of living community, culture, and affirmative regeneration.

Results

Data collection from our CAE and subsequent thematic clustering were carried out to explore these key dimensions. These are unpacked and analysed below. Despite starting out with the good intentions of introducing a care curriculum, we found that this was much harder to achieve. We found that across all layers of the ecosystem (macro, meso, micro), the capacity to design a curriculum of care was consistently being thwarted. This is unpacked below.

Curriculum

Lauren and Kathie unpack the definition of the curriculum of care as the parameters for dialogue within and across stakeholders, i.e. the macro and meso levels.

Care is belonging; compassion; empathy, pastoral and really we're looking at it from the whole person. (L)

Curriculum of care is ultimately about care for the students and what that looks like, and to me it's always been about neighbouring learners, be its students or us designing it, implementing it, teaching it, assessing it, that we're all learning in it together. (L)

We owe it to them ... we need to make sure that the [any] curriculum we offer is cared for, i.e. well designed, reviewed, and revised. (K)

The next two quotes, however, detail how difficult it is to develop curricula in a vacuum of executive leadership. The second of the quotes below, while connected, is more nuanced. It is the difference between what leaders of the institutions espouse at the macro level, and perhaps even believe is happening, and the experience of the staff and the micro.

the disconnect, when the culture is supposed to be one of care and belonging and we as leaders try to enact that in our relationship and our care for the curriculum. But then it wasn't there? Wasn't sustained by the [executive] leaders. We're trying to work in that space. It just kind of crashed or it just crashed around us. (K)

I don't think the care extends beyond themselves. Maybe that's cause there isn't an understanding of curriculum. If I follow what design entails, you need your leaders to sit down together and then be talking to their junior colleagues. I wanted to facilitate this so that junior colleagues could know what course design looks like, know what backwards mapping looks like ... they all work together. (K)

This quote at the meso level demonstrates the (lack of) commitment to the development of the curriculum of care by some stakeholders. There is also a shouldering of tremendous responsibility by leaders to produce curriculum and the resulting student success. Perhaps a blind spot in retrospect?

if we weren't going to take people with us – we had to build the curriculum because we couldn't have students graduating without being capable of teaching all of the curriculum. (K)

Transrelational and agile leadership

The data identifying the theme of leadership identifies a mix of leadership practices; some of them positive, some mistakes, and some of them under siege. The data leading to these learnings is unpacked below.

The following quotes from Lauren and Kathie at the macro level show that while they had planned for team growth and curriculum improvement, on reflection, the assumption that education academics should be skilled curriculum developers was flawed.

I tried to lift the bar ... a more umbrella view of the program ... I made assumptions. (K)

staff in the school ... (exhibited) no self-awareness and (nor the) capacity to see what they didn't know and what they could not do without further expertise and support. (L)

Instead of moving forward with their goals, Lauren and Kathie were thwarted, realising that:

staff did not trust ... did not want to change, liked their ways. (L)

The old saying, "attack is the best form of defence applied here" ... many practitioners who have come to higher ed who have not been mentored appropriately ... (who have) not studied learning and teaching in higher education have said to me: things like 'I didn't know it was useful to collect data on student outcomes, on evidence of improvement; evidence of what I am doing ... why don't they send out an email telling us to collect this? (K)

This appears to be the result of a need to "save face".

they argue we are practitioners and you can't tell us what to do as we get good TPEs' [student evaluations]. (K)

Relationships were a concern on the micro and meso levels and acted as a barrier to curriculum design. This was evidenced in the unwillingness to collaborate - an expectation of good practice:

No one had an interest in collaboration. Trying to get people to talk to each other ... All of that was just so unfamiliar (L).

It was also seen in the way people conducted their relationships:

Gossip ... privately undermined me and Kathie, he complained about the process and purpose when he had originally agreed to it, he pretended...

The next set of quotes, while also about resistance, were experienced at the meso level, where being thwarted happened at three levels. The first is clear – these detractors are out in the open. The second is evidence of someone undermining the process and the third speaks of something much more insidious.

there was a resistance ... most of our time in this review, was arguing about doing it, not ... doing. (L)

playing this role [of learning leader] was impossible ... he [one member] did not act as advocate of curriculum change, he stopped attending meetings ... He [another member] wanted a very different kind of mapping and made it very confusing ... things stagnated. (L)

One woman sought me out after the meeting saying 'oh my goodness it was one of the best team meetings ever ... it really allowed us to think about why we weren't able to improve our curriculum and how we weren't working together ... there are so many problems with cliques that no one will really say out loud so it was good to tackle it head on ... everything isn't fine. (K)

Care of others

There was substantive data about care for colleagues and students. On careful analysis, it was clear that there was a duality in caring for the curriculum and others.

At the macro level, Kathie's care for the curriculum was demonstrated through her passion for ensuring the design is right but also in the care for academics and the profession.

I no longer get frustrated that academics don't know how to undertake curriculum design. I realise it's a very difficult thing to do.

the reflexivity of vulnerability of the profession ... I was concerned that I was entering into the public discourse of discrediting the profession ...The important thing is... tell a story about growth.

The collaborative autoethnography records the surprise when they recognise the expected care for the student is missing:

There is no mention in our reflection of the students being mentioned, except for that "they love us". (K)

Care for others was seen through her own growth as a leader in accepting responsibility for failing to deliver and her ability to see this as an opportunity for growth. This was an act of self-compassion and compassion for her colleagues:

It was like, standing in the embers ... Inert; thinking about all of this; kept chugging along, but was sort of breaking. And just knew that I wasn't going to run away. I was just going to tread water ... paddle and hang on to the goodness that I could ... And do the best that I could in this context. (L)

But what we do if we had our time over? What we did acknowledge is this way isn't working and we stepped out. (L)

It also reflects the underpinning values of Katjinin Bidi and Ubuntu.

I don't care where students graduate from. I want them to have the same experience, the same outcomes. We owe it to them – i.e. education is a social good - yet schooling in Australia is so inequitable. Given this, we need to make sure that the curriculum we offer is cared for, i.e. well designed, reviewed, and revised (K)

Kathie is particularly concerned that students can teach relationally and for a regenerative future.

we couldn't have students graduating without being capable of teaching all of the curriculum for the future.
(K)

Discussion

It is not merely for the sake of regulatory procedures or contributing to the international conversation that program and data analysis are important. It is also essential to evidence, provoke and promote professional learning conversations so that program review and curriculum design are effectively implemented and embedded across HE. Employing collaborative autoethnography (CAE) of educational leaders, and a metaphorical, three-dimensional personal narrative inquiry framework is the key unique differentiator for this study. It is also novel to publicly share the failings of leaders in this space. On the flip side, there is also a need to disseminate good practice and share achievements.

Through a CAE approach, we have established that we, as leaders, care deeply about the curriculum. A curriculum of care for higher education was defined through our research where all stakeholders participate in and contribute to designing, implementing and evaluating an environment of teaching, learning and assessment. All individuals are included, supported, belong and feel safe and are encouraged to care for each other. There is a commitment to compassion and to asking 'what happened to you?'

While a discourse on using the terminology "curriculum of care" exists (Koschel, 2023; Maddock et al., 2019; Vojinovij et al., 2024; Watson, 2004) we have coined the term in the context of curriculum design in higher education. It draws attention to how all curricula can be developed. The commitment concept draws on neuroscience, acknowledging that trauma, as well as good experiences, influence our behaviour (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). While we shared the aspirations of transrelational and agile leaders, we were not successful at bringing about curriculum change. We were consistently hindered at all three levels: macro, meso and micro:

"...the disconnect, when the culture is supposed to be one of care and belonging and we as leaders try to enact that in our relationship and our care for the curriculum. But then it wasn't there? Wasn't sustained by the [executive] leaders" (K) - macro

"No one had an interest in collaboration. Trying to get people to talk to each other ... All of that was just so unfamiliar" (L) - meso

"No one had an interest in collaboration. Trying to get people to talk to each other ... All of that was just so unfamiliar" (L) - micro

Some of these barriers at the macro and meso levels were beyond our powers, however, some appear to be hard lessons learned about managing relationships. Zeviots et al. (2024) offer codesign as a method to work through the cultural - discursive, material-economic, and socio-political environments of universities, but there is no mention of leadership.

As leaders, through it all, there remained a firm commitment to caring for others, a positive characteristic for a leader in contemporary higher education (Branson & Mara, 2019). It aligns with the recent return to affective leadership (See Munro & Thanem, 2018; Renault & Tarakci, 2023).

We believed we were ready as leaders with a "strong back, soft front, (and) wild heart" (Brown, 2015; 2018) "to be able to listen to the not so comfortable truth" (K). However, no matter how much we cared about the curriculum, it was clear that we were thwarted in our goal to deliver a curriculum review that was caring. The biggest barrier was that while we had thought we had understood the ecology of the environment and thought that we had the right people at the table from the outset (Krause, 2023, p. 124), we had failed to accommodate the ecosystem that did not support us or the process of collaborative curriculum decision making.

Just as Zamora and Bali (2025, p. 3) argued, we found that our ecosystem did not address our teachers who cared and served their students. In fact, in the context of HE, we were operating at odds with the environment (Branson & Mara, 2024). Further, we found that one cannot expect the HE executive leaders to demonstrate genuine engagement in enacting a socially just and caring space because it is at odds with the managerial practices of a neoliberal world as identified by Branson and Mara (2024).

The politics of care ethics helps to explore what happened to us as the project unfolded. Tronto (2013) identified five phases of care that, when unpacked, ask us to be: attentive, responsible, competent, responsive and trusting. This means that everyone needed to be willing to take action in a way where they were vulnerable and with an expectation that they would be continually cared for. We acknowledge that such a suite of expectations is problematic in contemporary HE; one that does not encourage such vulnerability (Branson & Mara, 2024). Further, we acknowledge that even building such a culture means that we are addressing the symptom(s) and not the cause.

This is evidenced at the meso level, where staff with less experience in curriculum design and the subsequent behaviours as a result, have also played a role in us not meeting our goal. On face value, adopting Brown's "rumble" (2018) should have worked. We also used Grant's data/evidence-based thinking, but we did not remove emotion/application from the equation. This need to "save face" is an important lesson learned. There is substantial literature supporting academics' ingrained sense of being an impostor, fear of failure and public failings (Jaremka et al., 2020). In common with Dowie-Chin and Schroeder (2022), we found that academics with low knowledge and skills in curriculum design were especially resistant. If we return to Brown's seminal work (2015), the foundation for the silencing behaviours is most likely shame.

Our findings speak of the need to consider all curriculum reviews as opportunities for professional development for all staff. This is particularly relevant given the current heightened focus on programmatic assessment because of generative AI. Linked to capacity, the findings also suggest that some of the academics perceive care as transactional and performative: "they love us". An explanation may be found in the work of Dowie-Chin and Schroder (2022) who found in their case study, a highly regarded college educator used "care to win over her students" (p. 866). This behaviour had stemmed from her entry into the faculty where she was positioned as less expert and as ill-equipped, and so she decided to take on the gendered role of care, or "at least giving the impression that she cared for students".

The findings showed we cared for the curriculum, and we cared for others. Given that the data are autobiographical narratives, we expected to see mentions of caring for oneself. That we did not was surprising. Instead, we were left feeling rather bruised and in need of self care: "It was like, standing in the embers ... Inert; thinking about all of this; kept chugging along, but was sort of breaking" (L). This feeling is not unusual (Bosetti & Heffernan, 2021). "We need to cultivate ecosystems and cultures that recognise, value, support, and reward care and equity work for all, and consider 'socially just care' everyone's responsibility" (Zamora & Bali, 2025, p. 3). Calls such as this, are gaining momentum with publications such as the 'Caring University' (McClure, 2025) and 'The Gentle Academic' (Butler-Henderson & Ashok, 2024).

To engage in complicated curriculum conversations, we need to return to our strengths, compassion and our creativity and reflect on our own assumptions. Moreover, it is essential that university leaders create an environment conducive to a curriculum of care. We need to give priority to enable staff to develop their teaching and curriculum development capabilities. We recognise the need to provide support for new leaders, early career and staff who are new to HE on how to develop/review and write curriculum to boost their confidence, ability, capacity and agency. The solution can be found in Branson and Mara (2019)'s fundamental principles of relational leadership in HE, which include but are not limited to: know your team members individually; maximise the potential of every individual; and create an environment where people can not only be well but thrive and flourish physically, socially and emotionally. "This necessitates that the higher education leader has the courage to lead such a dramatic cultural change, the authenticity to personally promote and model the change with sincerity and conviction, and the wisdom to create, support, and sustain the change." (Branson & Mara, 2024, p. 87).

Relational connections are authentically human in nature and are so much more than technical solutions. Acade-

-mic work in HE, such as the curriculum design and renewal processes discussed in this paper, requires us to change mindsets by engaging in challenging and nuanced conversations to enable a shared vision, purpose and culture grounded in trust, openness, transparency, honesty, integrity, collegiality and ethical principles (Branson & Mara, 2019). We argue that care theory, with its focus primarily on the value of relationships (Noddings, 2002) between the carer and the cared for, should be understood by learning leaders, as it is in an African ethic of ubuntu caring, as an emancipatory, humanising and politico-pedagogical act. We should be explicit with our followers and acknowledge, as Tronto (1993) suggests, that care is a democratic process where all stakeholders make decisions about the allocation of the labour of care. Embracing the Noongar concept of kaartdijin bidi allows us to also acknowledge that it is a learning journey where we connect with one another in place and time (Wooltorton et al., 2022).

Moving forward, for the purposes of our own leading learning through curriculum review, we draw on the following leading learning dimensions (Krause, 2023) that together challenge perceptions and open up new ways to think about and enact leading learning in HE: understanding learner-centred leadership principles; co-designing strategy; connecting with colleagues; and leading with integrity. The last two align well with Branson and Mara's (2019; 2024) concern for taking the time to know the members of your team. Importantly, while our style of leadership focused on the micro, these latter strategies call upon us to consider opportunities that enhance leadership at the meso and macro levels.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have advocated for the ongoing need to value the agency of academics and students in their work and learning, recognising this as integral to, rather than peripheral to, institutional decision-making (Marques et al., 2024). We have defined the curriculum of care. Through the telling of two learning leaders' stories, it is clear that learning is enacted through the interactions and relationships of members within HE communities. Our focus has been on agile leadership, exercising self-awareness and critical reflection and building on our own leadership capacities. We acknowledge that we are most effective when serving as partners, that is as servant leaders, to teams rather than when teams serve them; when we are courageous and when we listen, when we are curious and encourage mistakes to create and sustain a culture of change that supports new ideas and practices (Branson & Marra, 2019; 2024; Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Eva et al., 2019; Karakose et al., 2022). Table 1 summarises the strategies that inspire and support a curriculum of care mapped against the HE context.

In these super complex times of hierarchical university structures and performance driven, competitive and metrified environments (Barnett, 2020), there is a growing recognition that cultivating relational leadership skills and curriculum matters. There is also a need for integrity and courage (Branson & Mara; 2024; Krause, 2023). In enacting the courage of care, we have tried to cast shame aside to share with others some of our learnings. We have realised that we need to be strategic, create a plan and communicate this clearly and frequently and have a few good people around us whom we can trust. To understand individual lives, we need to understand the times in which we live and the circumstances of other people. If we are going to achieve the kind of future we envisage through education, we need to connect more with the university community and draw on their skills in investing in a culture of learning together and embracing an ethics of care based on shared values. When we reconsider ourselves in relation to others and care again, we are far better enabled to disrupt uncaring and unjust practices.

From a curriculum of care perspective, HE is contextualised; it is embedded in its provenance, its local histories, cultures and communities. In this way, learning is not merely a neuro-psychological behaviour, but rather, where ideas of humanity are deeply ingrained, where ethical and political responsibilities and questions of equity and social justice are foregrounded.

We have challenged traditional pedagogical hierarchies in curricula and academic relationships and instead we argue for "caring with others" and engaging in reciprocal processes in pedagogical encounters, instead of a pedagogical one-way exercise where roles and responsibilities (of who is meant to care and who is meant to be taken care of) are fixed. A curriculum of care for higher education ensures that the people at the table are diverse and that they feel they can lean into their courage and speak authentically.

Table 1. Strategies that inspire and support a curriculum of care.

Cultivate relational leadership skills	Meso, micro
Consider your learning as a journey, constantly iterating by reaching backwards and forwards	Macro, meso and micro
Cultivate courage to have brave conversations that include scrutinising why and how your leadership of a project failed	Macro, meso and micro
Ensure the planning stage is not skipped and once the plan has been created, communicate this clearly, and frequently, and have a few good people around you who you can trust	Macro, meso and micro
Prioritise staff professional learning in curriculum design – see curriculum design as an opportunity for professional learning but be mindful that academics with gaps in their knowledge may feel shame	Macro, meso and micro
Care for humans and non-humans to regenerate for the future	Macro, meso and micro
Prioritise time to know your team and create the environment in which everyone can thrive	Meso, micro

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