Book review of Catherine J. Denial (2024). A pedagogy of kindness. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

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Introduction

I came to *A Pedagogy of Kindness* (see Figure 1) not through an abstract interest in affective approaches to teaching, but through a moment of professional recognition. While reviewing a draft of my teaching philosophy statement for my HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia) Fellowship portfolio, my mentor observed that much of my teaching and mentoring practice appeared to be grounded in what she depicted as a pedagogy of kindness. At the time, I had not articulated my work in these terms. The comment prompted both curiosity and reflection. I was curious as to whether such a pedagogy had been expressed with conceptual clarity and scholarly rigour, and reflective about why I had long enacted these practices without clearly theorising them.
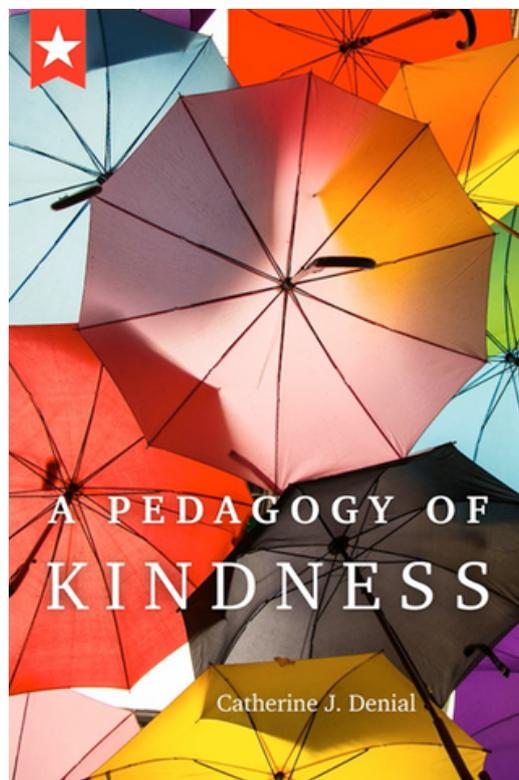

Figure 1: The book cover of *A Pedagogy of Kindness*.

Catherine J. Denial's book responds directly to this tension. She insists that kindness in higher education is intentional, ethical, and intellectually serious. Kindness, as Denial conceptualises it, is not sentimental softness, but a deliberate pedagogical stance that shapes how educators relate to students, colleagues, and themselves. This positioning is consistent with recent higher education scholarship that argues kindness deserves clearer conceptual definition and stronger empirical attention, as opposed to being treated as an intuitive personal trait (Fox & Aspland, 2024).

My own educational practice spans language teaching, TESOL scholarship, and academic development work coaching educators across multiple campuses and disciplines. I often describe myself as a bridge builder in higher education, connecting cultures, disciplines, and levels of expertise through equity, collaboration, and scholarly inquiry, shaped by a career across varied institutional contexts. Reading Denial's book helped me recognise that what I have framed as bridge building also carries a more precise pedagogical identity, namely, kindness as an enacted ethic, expressed through design choices, discourse practices, and the everyday ways we make learning possible.

Organisation

The book is organised into an introduction, four thematic chapters, and a concluding reflection. This structure reflects Denial's core claim that kindness must be implemented holistically, beginning with the educator and extending into curriculum, assessment, and classroom interaction.

The introductory chapter establishes kindness as a rigorous pedagogical ethic instead of an optional disposition. Denial draws her own experiences in higher education to critique norms that prioritise control, surveillance, and compliance at the expense of trust and relationship. She reflects on how academic cultures can train educators into suspicion, especially through assumptions about student motivation and academic integrity. She also traces how her teaching changed when she began to regard trust, dialogue, and shared responsibility as the starting points for learning. In this way, the introduction reads as both reflective narrative and ethical argument. Besides, it complements the claim in Fox and Aspland's systematic review that kindness in higher education is commonly discussed implicitly yet rarely defined with sufficient precision, even though it is increasingly visible across teaching and learning discourses (Fox & Aspland, 2024).

Chapter 1, *Kindness toward the Self*, turns inward. Denial contends that pedagogical kindness cannot be sustained by educators who are exhausted, isolated, and pressured to treat overwork as virtue. She offers constructive strategies for self-directed kindness, including investing in pedagogical development, placing boundaries around email, taking time away from work, scheduling rest and nourishment, protecting one's capacity to say no, and refusing to go it alone through forms of pedagogical mutual aid (Denial, 2024, pp. 26-35). This chapter is consonant with my work experience of supporting academic colleagues through communities of practice and mentoring relationships, where professional learning and emotional sustainability are inseparable.

Chapter 2 then reframes the syllabus as an ethical document rather than a bureaucratic artefact. Denial interrogates punitive language and hidden expectations that can intensify student anxiety and erode trust. She argues for clarity, transparency, flexibility, and invitational language that respects students as capable partners in learning. This argument intersects with student-centred leadership narratives within my current institutional context. In a previous interview with the Academic Dean of Kaplan Business School, Professor James Adonopoulos, the emphasis on discourse-based workshops instead of conventional knowledge-transmission lectures, and on cultivating an inclusive and psychologically safe academic culture, provides a concrete institutional example of how student-centred values can be operationalised through academic staff development and teaching culture (Vojinovikj et al., 2024).

The third thematic chapter confronts a common fear that kindness undermines standards. Denial rejects this dichotomy, articulating that rigorous learning can coexist with humane assessment when educators foreground feedback, transparency, opportunities for revision, and assessment design that supports growth rather than merely sorting. Her stance aligns with longstanding assessment for learning principles that position feedback as a driver of

learning and agency as distinct from a post hoc judgement (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

Chapter 4, *Kindness in the Classroom*, focuses on daily pedagogical interaction. Denial accentuates listening, responsiveness, and acknowledgement of students as whole persons with complex lives beyond the classroom. Importantly, she distinguishes kindness from permissiveness. Kindness in her representation involves clarity and ethical judgement, including boundaries that protect both students and educators.

The concluding chapter synthesises these strands and reiterates kindness as a sustainable practice in contrast to a set of isolated techniques. Denial positions kindness as both individual and collective work, shaped by institutional cultures and professional norms. She also challenges educators to extend kindness into policy, leadership, and collegial relationships, maintaining that pedagogical choices always situate within broader structures.

Critical evaluation

A *Pedagogy of Kindness* makes a substantive contribution to contemporary discussions of teaching through establishing kindness as a legitimate and intellectually grounded pedagogical ethic. Denial refuses to reduce kindness to a personality trait or a 'feel good' gesture. Instead, she considers it as an intentional practice that informs how educators design learning, exercise judgement, and sustain their work over time. This conceptualisation enables educators to recognise forms of relational and emotional labour not as peripheral to academic work, but as central to pedagogical responsibility.

One of the book's strengths is its careful integration of reflective narrative and pedagogical reasoning. Denial's use of her personal journey demonstrates how teaching practices are shaped by ongoing reflection, professional learning, and ethical reconsiderations. This approach invites readers to examine their own assumptions about authority, care, and responsibility in teaching, while allowing space for diverse disciplinary and institutional interpretations.

Noteworthily, the book is persuasive in its insistence that kindness is compatible with rigour and professional boundaries. Denial resists the notion that compassionate pedagogy entails lowered expectations or unstructured conduct. She presents kindness as requiring clarity, consistency, and ethical judgement. This distinction is particularly valuable in higher education contexts where educators may experience tension between care for learners and accountability demands.

A limitation, however, is that Denial's examples are primarily contextualised in the North American higher education sector. Readers working within different regulatory settings may need to translate her practices into their local constraints and professional expectations. But this limitation does not diminish the book's overall contribution. Rather, it draws our attention to the importance of contextual interpretation and reflective adaptation when engaging with pedagogical scholarship.

For me, the most lasting value of *A Pedagogy of Kindness* lies in the clarity it brings to practices I had previously undertaken without naming them. The book presented a vocabulary through which my work as an educator and professional development mentor could be understood not simply as supportive or relational, but as underpinned in an explicit pedagogical framework. In this sense, Denial's contribution is not only descriptive but enabling, giving an opportunity to educators to claim kindness as a legitimate foundation for rigorous, reflective, and sustainable academic practice.

Additional references

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