

Employing Isabel Wilkerson’s “Radical Empathy” to Pedagogy in Academia

By S. Virginia Gonsalves-Domond*

Wilkerson’s book, Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents introduces the term, “radical empathy,” as one mechanism to subvert structural hierarchies of social constructions. She defines “radical empathy” as “the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it” (p. 386). Translationally, it embraces repositioning, using one’s professorial privilege to enact social justice imperatives, model care connected with students’ struggles and lived epistemologies. Wilkerson makes clear; it is not pity or sympathy. In its most conventional depictions, the classroom represents a class divide, a hierarchical ordering between professors and students. In this differential power relationship, the professor is perceived as the sole knowledgeable transmitter to learners. This classroom culture is never regarded as a co-equal space of knowledge production and interrogations. In the transgressive refusal to normalize elements of coloniality in the academy, this writer (re) imagines new possibilities for transformations using the Wilkersonian concept of “radical empathy.” This view shifts the hegemonic perspective, and constructs counternarratives by catalyzing a paradigm shift, and reaffirms the allegiance to democratization, and flourishing in the classroom. This paper will identify myriad ways in which deployment of “radical empathy” pedagogy can be achieved.

Keywords: radical empathy, college teaching, pedagogy, faculty development

Employing Isabel Wilkerson’s “Radical Empathy” to Pedagogy in the Academy

Recent inundations in the academy have elevated the role of technology such as integrating the groundbreaking, Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the classroom environment. Denial’s (2024) recent publication entitled, *The Pedagogy of Kindness* takes a determinative stance, and moves the needle about the inherent value of this virtue as we “teach with a ready abundance of grace” (p.7). A recent webinar, hosted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, entitled, *Empathy and AI: Transforming Higher Education Conversations with Intelligence* with Baker and Sutcliffe (2025), identified ways of achieving more empathic conversations with students that “can move beyond transactional outreach.” Despite concerns with issues of ethicality, risks of manipulation, some have viewed its inclusion in the academy as revolutionary, and as redefining how education can be more digitally delivered, mitigating faculty burnout (Ybarra, 2024; Akgun and Greenhow, 2021). I concur with the view that human technology girded to socio-emotional intelligence may be perceived as invaluable in our 21st century given the following trends: demographic shifts in enrollment; the prohibitive cost of education; the metrics surrounding the cost versus

*Full Professor of Personality and Social Psychology, Social Sciences Human Services, Ramapo College of New Jersey, USA.

value relationship of a college education; and the alarming uptick in college shutterings. Interrogating new ways of elevating the classroom experience is by no means a novel enterprise (Gross-Davis 2009, Lowman 2000). For example, previous publications have examined the urgent need to transform higher education classrooms to reflect strategies to ensure better intercultural relationships with multicultural university classroom settings (Schwieger et al. 2010), trauma-informed teaching (Fallot and Harris, 2009, Carello and Butler 2015, Carello 2018), culturally-responsive teaching (Hammond 2014), abolitionist teaching (Robert 2023; Love 2019), warm demander pedagogy (Kleinfeld, 1975; Pacansky-Brock et al. 2022), and liberation pedagogy (Freire, 2018) to name a few.

A radical departure is a recent metaphoric characterization of educational spaces to that of carceral structures (Robert, 2023). At first encounter with this analogy, it appears off-putting, given our perceptions of penal institutions as places where individuals are warehoused, with minimal connections to rehabilitation and/or to opportunities for restorative justice. *It appears mystifying though that the halls of the academy would find any parallels to the U.S. prison-industrial complex.* However, this monumental reframing is articulated by Dr. Nikia Smith Robert, an interdisciplinary scholar and founder of Abolitionist Sanctuary; her care-first research is situated at the intersections of religion, ethics, and public policy. Authoring an article entitled, *An Ethic of Abolition: Becoming Educational Sanctuaries* in the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, she promulgated some compelling arguments that could not be contested or dismissed about decarcerating the educational-industrial complex. Threading similarities between schools and prisons, Dr. Robert identified that educational and carceral institutions find parallels in the following ways: schedules, authoritarian controls, architectural designs, rule-bound policies, language, and praxis. In attempting reforms, she posits the reimagined academy as well-equipped, educational sanctuaries, and embraces the notions of abolitionist pedagogy as democratizing tools, leveraging high-impact learning, and best practices for human flourishing and innovations.

Baked into its most conventional depictions, the classroom space represents a *class divide*, a hierarchical ordering between professor and students. Professors stand apart on a proverbial pedestal- all alliterative language. This model of spatial-educational power differential, traditionally conceived, is where, the professor is the sole and *primary* knowledgeable transmitter and educator to a larger community of learners. It is students who are required to adjust/readjust to the demands of professors and their draconian, syllabi-contracts, not the other way around (Robbins, 2025). In this jaundiced view, college is ostensibly designed for financial elites, the academically prepared, and for those who are identified as the heteronormative, historically privileged. Interestingly enough, what the data is now revealing, is that, a number of affluent white males are opting to delay college compared to their lower income peers (Gardner, 2024). The reduction in enrollment can and does have an impact on institutional viability, and from a purely survivalist perspective, increased enrollment and retention along with student satisfaction matter in the short and long-term to stem what is now visible, the epidemic tide of recent college closures.

So, the traditional pedagogic model is a tiered, unilateral system of authoritarian knowledge flow. Denial (2024) writes in simple, but compelling prose the

following, “Academia is not, by and large, a kind place. The engine of higher ed is fueled by stories of individualism, competition, prestige, and distrust” (p.1). She asserts that “people confuse kindness with the idea of “being nice.” Niceness, in contrast to compassion is often *unkind*” (p.1, 2). A professor’s possession of an earned doctorate degree is perceived as a tangible testimonial of the stark differences in the intellectual arc of knowledge power. At the risk of being repetitive, this type of classroom culture is generally not conceptualized as an egalitarian space of knowledge production and interrogations. In the transgressive refusal to normalize elements of coloniality in the academy, this writer (re) imagines new possibilities for sublimity, transcendence, and transformations using the Wilkersonian concept of “radical empathy.” Her powerfully insightful book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* introduces the term, “radical empathy” as one stratagem to dismantle intractable, centuries-long, caste systems that have ossified inequalities and inequities. Along the same vein, this writer borrows this construct in a similarly transgressive way to disrupt the entrenched, institutional structure of power in academia keeping professors and students segregated and unequal in the educational milieu. Firstly, Wilkerson identifies it as a mechanism to subvert structural and racialized hierarchies of artificial and social constructions. She defines “radical empathy” as “the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it” (p. 386). She also makes clear what it is not. It is not pity or sympathy.

Therefore, as I translationally envision its innovation and implementation in the academy, “radical empathy” pedagogy is predicated on the foregrounded principle that it is of premium value to build a supportive college classroom community, while congruently privileging high-quality learning, embracing diversity, and rigorous interrogations. These sets of potent conditions are not mutually exclusive, and not only can coexist, but when they are intentionally applied can produce elevated outcomes in learning, student motivation, retention, and persistence. Further, this perspective of incorporating “radical empathy” in the academy deviates from and contests the hegemonic view rooted in a compressed hierarchy. *This new framing privileges the decolonization, the deconstruction of a hierarchically-structured, pedagogic modality devoid of empathy-care in higher education.* It constructs a humanistic counternarrative by catalyzing a paradigm shift, and reaffirms the allegiance to human dignity, self-determination, “the sovereignty of the good”, and governs realistic possibilities. Ostensibly, this approach advocates for building upwards, to affirmative concepts such as self-actualization and peak experiences in the classroom. It is a reset button that rethinks the construct of how synergistically, evidence-based instructional strategies can be actively incorporated. This paper will identify myriad ways in which deployment of “radical empathy” pedagogy in the classroom can be realistically accomplished in order to amplify students’ academic experiences, and chart more effective educational pathways. *The adjoining thesis, is that, “radical empathy” is not argued here as an overarching or mega concept which eclipses other pedagogic practices, student affairs best practices, the epidemic of disconnection and disengagement that many are eyewitnesses to, or multiple modes of delivery.* This curated, yet urgent perspective is also generated as one of many adaptive responses to documented academic decline, underperformance, to tackling students’ low

perceptions of need, what appears as a paucity of student motivation, and to increasingly-reported mental health challenges.

Further, it is noteworthy that high-quality teaching is not a middling experience, nor one deployed with a kind of detached, arrogant, and/or narcissistic hubris. In my view, it is a performative art form strengthened by preparation, and buoyed with care-competence. Those of us who are: committed to the frontlines; to the dynamic generation of equitable classroom spaces; to a pedagogy of care where the nexus of physical and intellectual energies flow freely; where students' excitement is palpably expressed; and when there is an unshackled, liberation to educate and interrogate in a safe space of respect are the essential ingredients of high-voltage, kinetic pedagogy. A comingling of joy and dynamism will "congeal" so to speak, as we embrace both the passion, aspiration, and in many cases, the prescriptive nature of this perspective.

The foregoing gives birth to the question of how to translationally infuse this concept in the academy for those of us with an unwavering commitment to students' success, and to educational outcomes associated with the two alliterative words: equity and effectiveness? Here are some strategies for infusing "radical empathy" pedagogy.

Strategies in Incorporating "Radical Empathy" Pedagogy

A number of journals have emerged to accelerate discussions on innovative ways to engage students in the academy. These include the following: *Journal of Empowering Teaching Excellence*; *Journal of Excellence in College Teaching*; *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*; *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*; and *Journal of College Students' Development*. The display of "radical empathy" pedagogy has many obvious advantages. It is a clarion call to action to better students' lives, and in tandem elevates academic outcomes. It is a potent reminder that enthusiastic, dedicated educators can be transformational; it speaks to a grander ethos, where human liberation can flower. Gonsalves-Domond (2021) writes that "the physical and psychic energy that flows between students and instructors boomerangs, and is an ignitive, dynamic process." Additionally, each college classroom, a community-within-community can be a beacon of hope, a cornerstone for the intellect, creativity, and a source of agentic power.

"Radical empathy" pedagogy in terms of its praxis represents a robust, holistic set of behaviors and innovations in the context of a classroom structure. The roadmap incorporated here, folds in learner-centric approaches that affirm the importance of a shared humanity; the explicit recognition that students walk into the academic arena with a multitude of challenges, intersectional identities or identity markers. Another component of "radical empathy" pedagogy is a nuanced understanding of the layered impacts of intersectionality. This is conceptualized as meaningful ways in which social statuses interact and result in differing experiences with multiple systems of oppression, racism, sexism, classism, ableism, power, and privilege. Given the fact that our classrooms are not monolithic spaces, what are some of the visible and/or invisible diversities in the classroom? The following is not exhaustive.

They include: race; ethnicity; social class; cultures; exposure to adverse childhood experiences such as trauma; poverty; food fragility; being unhoused; sexual orientations; immigrant; undocumented status; non-native speakers; polyglots; differing eating habits; diverse learning styles; first generation college students; neurodiverse students; variability on the disabilities-ableism spectrum; privilege, disprivilege; differences in academic preparation; reentry; non-degreed; veteran; and experiences with victimization, trafficking, abuse and assaults are the litany of variables in a classroom.

The research seems to indicate that there are a number of desired effects for students' successes, faculty satisfaction, and institutional longevity when affirmative instructor-student rapport is established (Webb and Barrett, 2014; Frisby and Martin, 2010; Dobransky and Frymier, 2004). This evidence-based data dovetail with colleges' central mission to: increase enrollment, maximize students' satisfaction, and reduce attrition.

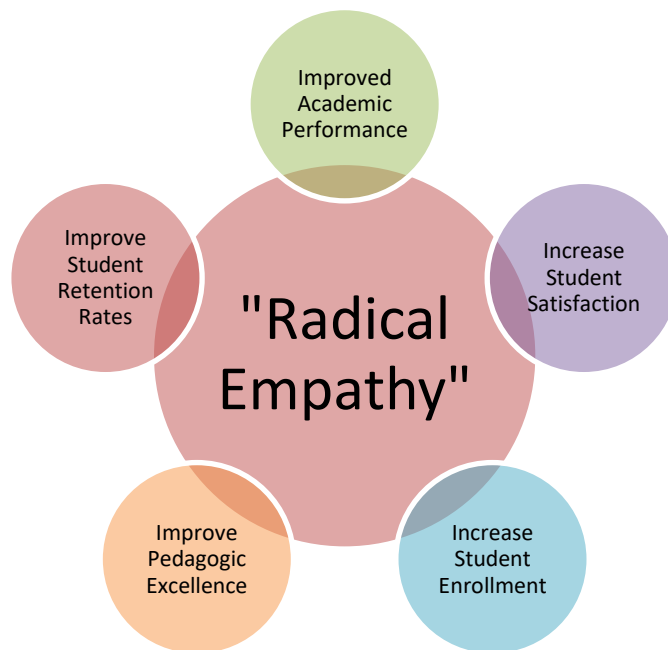
Below are 25 strategies grounded in "radical empathy" pedagogy that could be intentionally and collectively utilized in the classroom. Admittedly, some of these may not be novel, and this listing is by no means exhaustive, but when used additively, in my view, can multiplicatively and synergistically produce positive outcomes. There is an explicit understanding that online, synchronous, or asynchronous teaching systems are different in a number of ways from in-person teaching. Notably, these strategies though can be applicable across different teaching modalities or platforms.

1. Dedicatedly model "radical empathy". Create and be an active participant in a classroom culture that is safe and fulsomely embraces equity and inclusivity;
2. Know each student's names as this memory skill transitions the relationship from a "gesellschaft" to a "gemeinschaft" one. At the beginning of the semester, have them share a brief autobiography, and disclose yours as well;
3. Invite students to interview each other in order to facilitate peer-to-peer interactions, thereby highlighting shared similarities and identifying diversities;
4. Provide multiple deadlines for class assignments as this supplies agency. Audit one's syllabi to eliminate punitive language as Robert (2023) recommends;
5. Provide *Rubrics* for all assignments that align with course and learning objectives to serve as the North Star for high-quality work product submissions; Demystify what constitutes high-impact work that meets your expectations;
6. Encourage students to visit during your office hours to help scaffold individual learning, clarification, build relationships, to co-gather information, and be positioned for dedicated mentorship;
7. Develop proficiency in delivering materials with multiple learning and modality styles. My students are expressing more interest in PowerPoint scaffolds and access to notes on *Learning Management Systems (LMS)*;
8. Generate probing questions in the course of careful planning and lecture preparations so that student participation is more precision-drilled, vibrant, even if uncomfortable issues and unearthing "inconvenient truths" are batted into the space;
9. Invite, model, and support all students to critically think about and interrogate the range of academic materials. Critique established theories. Institutionalize

- this application to ideas, and concepts while providing oxygen to non-dominant and reserved student-learners;
10. Be vigilant and actively incorporate real life examples, reflections, experiential activities, and lived epistemologies into assignments that can be graded, and in so doing incentivize and scaffold layers of experiences into an edifice of coherence with theories;
 11. Provide a curated Review Sheet prior to each exam to provide guidance on assessments;
 12. Build in a review period *prior* to each exam. Ask students to come in prepared for an active period of engagement, questions and answers;
 13. Model self-awareness through the identification of pain, struggles, and hardships encountered and endured. Share your humanity;
 14. Incorporate diverse voices with curated speakers and content experts. *YouTube*, blogs, TED Talks, and publisher-generated materials can be effectively utilized to include plural perspectives and narratives;
 15. Ensure that group work is equitable by clearly defining individual roles. Fold in peer evaluations to keep everyone accountable;
 16. Articulate high expectations of academic performance while being grounded in the evidence-based understanding surrounding underperformance and utilize best practices to support students' learning;
 17. Become conversant in Learning Management Systems, as students have become more digitally sophisticated;
 18. Continue to build your expertise and proficiency in scholarship, individual research in your own disciplinary lanes, across multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary platforms. This dedication to active learning and creativity will be transparent, respected by students, and will model the revered academic virtues of continual discovery, exploration, and learning;
 19. Provide ample discussions on ethics, its praxis, and opportunities for interrogations; thoughtfully assign students to collaborate in small groups;
 20. Utilize best practices in AI technology to learn empathic conversational techniques; (Baker and Sutcliff (2025))
 21. Provide quick feedback on handed in-work products, and work on outreaches and capacity building with students who may be underprepared and/or struggling;
 22. Utilize curated videos from subject and content materials to broaden students' bandwidth of knowledge;
 23. Over-communicating the course requirements and due dates will keep students more focused amidst the plurality of work-life distractions. Offer generous clarifications on assignments;
 24. Assign high-quality textbooks and readings with built in interactive tools, chapter summaries, glossaries, self-administered quizzes that promote individual learning in and outside the classroom, and that also meet the needs of diverse and neurodivergent learners; and
 25. Build collaborations, cross-fertilize across teaching circles to generate best practices, exchange ideas, brainstorm and share resources through individual programs and institutions, across state and regions to be a community of educators living "radical empathy" pedagogy.

As we leverage the impact that this praxis has on students' learning, what is particularly encouraging is a recent survey published in *Stigma and Health* about students' willingness to share mental health challenges to their professors. The authors reported that 60 percent of the 37, 206 students surveyed across 87 colleges and universities indicated that they would reach out to their professors if their mental status affected their studies or academic work. Data also revealed that students of color were less likely to disclose that they needed help. There is a lot to unpack here about any perceived tendency to non-disclosure among students of color. This finding may affirm support that the display of "radical empathy" may offer possibilities of support for all students who are undergoing mental health challenges. Providing a safe space for students to share their challenges, and referring them to in-house, counseling centers may help to scaffold their learning and retention. The view endorsed here is that the creation of spaces where professorial behaviors and care demeanors get modelled can have long-term successes on students' intellectual growth, development, agency, transformation, and freedom. Please see Figure 1 on how "radical empathy" is conceived as influencing affirmative pedagogic and student outcomes in a non-linear composition.

Figure 1. "Radical Empathy" and Proposed Student-Pedagogic Outcomes



How is “Radical Empathy” Pedagogy Different from other Pedagogical Praxes?

“Radical Empathy” Pedagogy (REP) is a novel theorizing that innovatively shifts the *structural* paradigm of a traditional, hierarchical, teacher-centric model to one that privileges a student-centered foregrounding. At the epicenter of this pedagogic praxis are the following: a tangible care for students, hardwiring of collaboration, exhibiting a deep respect for students, and valuing their lived epistemologies. All of the foregoing components, optimize learner outcomes through reducing distress in the classroom by eschewing the toxicities and invalidations of how caste finds insidious manifestations. These goals can be meaningfully achieved though leveraging varied learning modalities and understanding neurodiversity, while promoting discovery, inquiry, and leaning in on critical thinking skills development and interrogations. *REP provides opportune groundings, where students can consistently rely on their experiences as a cascading pyramid of authentic knowledge production.*

Further, REP’s core ideals where theory meets praxis are fused at the fulcrum of: creating and scaling up authentic alliances with students, utilizing best practices in positive psychology, and applying principles of humanism. One’s commitment to students’ academic and personal successes must be evident, transparent, and visible in the shared space of the classroom. An important element of REP, is that, educators invest time and energy in knowing students’ preferred names. In the end, we should be eyewitnesses to an engaged, participatorily-active classroom, where students are able to authentically relate to each, and connect the mosaic of their life experiences without fear of shame and/or adverse judgements. The gold standard in REP as applied in the Wilkersonian model, rejects the concept of caste in the academy, the artificial rankings and assumptions about students’ positionality based on hegemonic hierarchies of race, class, gender, religion, abilities, neurodiversity, philosophies, and cultures. *REP assigns value to all students.*

REP is demanding and fulfilling, as it celebrates community-within-community, openness, dissent, and diversity, ever mindful of its importance with students of color who have chafed under the yoke of the intersectional, infrastructure of caste, and what Patricia Hills Collins so brilliantly in her 1990 book, *Black Feminist Thought* calls, the “matrix of oppression.” Here in lies the connective tissue of validating lived epistemological pluralism of students. As educators, the REP model requires us to vigorously lean into supporting meaning-making, acknowledge what Adler and Schwabe (2024) refer to as “disciplinary humility,” while fulsomely embracing multidisciplinary in the covenant, co-creation of knowledge production and creativity with our students. An ambitious task, indeed!

How then is REP similar and different from other pedagogic praxes? Firstly, REP like many others such as warm demander and culturally-relevant pedagogy overlap; they assume safe, warm, culturally respectful, and rooted postures of care, builds trust, and maintains rigor to optimize students’ self-efficacy. With respect to abolitionist teaching, Robert (2023) advances the notion of students’ agency and choices, the elimination of punitive techniques in syllabus and pedagogic styles that fashion academic environments as carceral-like. However, Bettina Love’s (2019) version of abolitionist teaching illuminated in her book, *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* foregrounds

the K-12 curriculum, providing an urgent call to action; central to her thesis is reckoning with injustice, ensuring that Black and Brown students achieve a transformative education by centering Black and Brown “mattering” and liberation from racial violence and oppression. Freire’s liberation pedagogy (2018) and bell hooks’ (1994) transgressive teaching resound with similar themes of educational liberation in which teachers and learners willingly breach and transgress boundaries of racism, sexism, and classism.

Notably, REP affirms all of those elements, and then some. In terms of identifying differences, REP widens the aperture, and achieves *broader, structural frameworks* of liberation and resilience across the creation of safe spaces with all students. Putting a finer point on REP, this praxis advocates beyond the socially constructed concepts of race, gender, and class to the ultimate elimination of **all** caste-like structures and shape-shifts within the wider, multicultural classroom and value-laden teaching in the academy. This praxis entails hard work, a commitment to the democratization of the classroom, and is ostensibly the most rewarding in potentially reshaping, rethinking, and re-imaging academic spaces.

Challenges to Incorporating “Radical Empathy” Pedagogy

Despite what I perceive are significant advantages to the creation and maintenance of a care-first, learner-centered environment in the academy, I wish to eschew a sanitized and/or unidirectional cognitive view of the embrace or readiness to accept the important leverages of “radical empathy” pedagogy. I wish to offer some deconstructions. Indeed, there may be a cognitive rigidity or resistance to the need or desire for the incorporation of “radical empathy” in academia based on the belief in “meritocracy” as the dominant and overarching motif to determine success in our community of learners. *This very belief of exclusion is caste-like.* By extension, the text and subtexts in the aforementioned view, is that, only students with measured academic talents should attend and graduate from our higher education institutions. I reject this jaundiced view based on its lack of inclusion and social justice imperatives and its contestation with the underlying premise of ‘radical empathy’ pedagogy. Robinson (2006) in his TED video bluntly makes the point that schools “kill” creativity, and in an urgent call to action prescribes that we actively cultivate the idiosyncratic talents and abilities of students. Resoundingly, he was arguing for radical changes in how the educational system is structured. In his popular video, he stated, ““I believe our only hope for the future is to adopt a new concept of human ecology, one in which we start to reconstitute our conception of the richness of human capacity. Our education system has mined our minds in the way we strip-mined the earth for a particular commodity. We have to rethink the fundamental principles in which we are educating our children.” Radical empathy pedagogy subscribes to this kind of radicalization and transformation.

Change though may not be easily accomplished. I taught *Honors: Global Awareness* in fall 2024 with an organic, discussion-centered, and seminar structure, and realized that a few students wanted adherence to the stricter, teacher-student hierarchy rather than the fluidity of a more liberal curriculum. This is reminder that

structural changes may require acclimation and dispersal time. In essence, the kind of reconstruction that is being promulgated here for the collective good may meet with some initial student resistance (and faculty push back). In fact, Weimer (2002) aligns with this writer's thinking when she makes the following assertion. She stated, "[T]here may be colleagues with traditional orientations to teaching who resist those who change in the directions proposed" (p.184). I conjecture that this may be especially so for who have acclimated or habituated to tiered-teaching approaches. Moreover, even motivated by what one may perceive as the "sovereignty of the good", and in the attempt to transform a classroom culture, that one will also be tasked to demonstrate *empirically* the question of whether this kind of pedagogy works in improving instructional and student outcomes? Indeed, this constitutes a fair, evidence-based question from which this author doesn't shrink from wanting to provide answers to. Robust evidence guided by qualitative and quantitative data should address the scholarship of that question in an evolving, heuristic context.

It must be reemphasized that "radical empathy" pedagogy is based on the belief that high-quality teacher investments aligned with the requisite, socioemotional capital can have a major impact on students' success. McCurdie (2024) has identified the following behaviors among Gen Z that promote inspiration in the classroom: emotional acuity, authenticity, creativity, and willingness to question authority. More infusions of "radical empathy" pedagogy by this metric could result in profound emotional connections with our students. Not every professor has this desire, capacity, and /or motivation as the musical group, the Eagles' song states to, "Take it to the Limit" so to speak. To use one's privilege in the service of others is a noble, altruistic endeavor. Admittedly, "radical empathy" pedagogy involves an unconditional deployment of psychic and physical energies. It isn't transactional per se, which in its implementation from my discipline of Social Psychology meets the operational definition of altruism rather than a prosocial behavior (Branscombe and Baron, 2016; Stangor and Frantz, 2025). In contrast, the status quo has predictability and normative powers, and doesn't necessitate change and adjustments. With the traditional model, faculty can behave with already (pre)scripted versions of interactions without any seismic breeches or fault lines. "Radical empathy" pedagogy requires a shift, dedication, passion, commitment, time, and energy.

Another issue that potentially presents a test to the author is whether "radical empathy" pedagogy as this "new frontier" to restructuring hierarchy within the academy will be misperceived, exploited, and that some students may take advantage of this new openness to their epistemologies, struggles, plights, and circumstances. Will some students view this as an opening then to request an inordinate amount of additional time to complete assignments and work products, and in essence "stress test" the very concept that was designed to be a sensitivity inclusion?

Individual decision-making will secure guardrails here. Faculty of color have indicated the exhaustion they already authentically experience in "being there for their students." Could this application of "radical empathy" pedagogy tip the scales toward occupational fatigue? Interrogatively, these are fecund areas of inquiry. From the author's perspective, it is important to note that "radical empathy" pedagogy in terms of self-care and boundaries should not be *depletive*. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks correctly notes, "There can be, and usually is, some degree

of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches” (p.2). So, charting a new set of pedagogic modalities will entail energy, but should not eviscerate us emotionally. In my view, the dynamics from which “radical empathy” pedagogy flow will have a boomerang effect in the classroom, resulting in renewal, educator satisfaction, and elation.

Conclusion

In the end, the prevailing question as I conclude is: how much of the “radical” can be embraced in “radical empathy” pedagogy for individual academicians? In pondering this question, I suspect that the answers will be *idiosyncratic*, based on choices, and realistic self-assessments of psychic disbursements. However, more steady and incremental infusions of this thematic, selfless dedication to students into classrooms could be emancipatory, as we strive for the well-being of all students, and simultaneously scaffold and shepherd our satisfaction in academia in terms of our long-term careers and intellectual growth. I am particularly moved by the analogy that kindness can be a balm (Denial 2024). By extension, I envision that “radical empathy” pedagogy can be a balm as well, or at the very minimum “balm-like” in classroom settings. Yes, the joy that many of us experience in teaching, combined with an amalgamated confluence of variables can boost pedagogic excellence. Further, support from our individual institutions to reward and incentivize instructional excellence will brace our internal fortitude to stay the course. Although this concept articulated here is not conceptualized as a transactional endeavor, the benefits can be win-win for students and professors.

It is the author’s conclusions, embracing an additive calculus (and I parenthetically add some idealism still internalized over four-and-a half decades of college teaching) that “radical empathy” pedagogy matters in the academy and beyond. To once again utilize an agricultural metaphor, “the beyond” are the seeds that we collectively plant, germinate, and that produce much fruits and collateral benefits in fertile soil. Denial (2024), a champion of kindness in pedagogy concludes with a question, “why not be kind?” (p.104). I will follow suit with a similar interrogative, comingled with an invitation to why not display “radical empathy” to our students? The reverberatory effects await us all, as we grow more layers of democratizing spaces and positive transformations in our institutional and societal places. So, there are multiple thought leaders who argue for change in structural systems including Wilkerson and Robinson. However, I conclude with a quote from Octavia Butler, the speculative fiction author whose work contests hierarchical structures of caste, and who writes, “The only lasting truth is change”. In my view, “Radical Empathy” pedagogy is about unflinching change in the academy.

References

- Akgün S, Greenhow C (2021) Artificial intelligence in education: Addressing ethical challenges in K–12 settings. *AI and Ethics*, 2(3): 431–440. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-021-00096-7>
- Baker M, Sutcliffe J (2025) Empathy and AI: Transforming higher education conversations with intelligence. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 February. <https://www.chronicle.com>
- Branscombe N, Baron RA (2016) *Social psychology*, 14th edn. New York: Pearson.
- Butler O (1993) *Parable of the sower*. New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows.
- Carello J, Butler LD (2015) Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 35(3): 262–278.
- Carello J (2018) Principles for trauma-informed teaching and learning. <https://traumainformedteaching.blog/2018/07/08/principles-for-trauma-informed-teaching-and-learning/>
- Denial CJ (2024) *A pedagogy of kindness*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Dobransky N, Frymier A (2004) Developing teacher–student relationships through out-of-class communication. *Communication Quarterly*, 52: 211–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370409370193>
- Fallot RD, Harris M (2006) *Trauma-informed services: A self-assessment and planning protocol*. Washington, DC: Community Connections. <https://www.theannainstitute.org/CCTICSELFASSPP.pdf>
- Frisby BN, Martin M (2010) Instructor–student and student–student rapport in the classroom. *Communication Education*, 59: 146–164.
- Freire P (2018) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 50th anniversary edn. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Gonsalves-Domond SV (2001) *The nexus of teacher to student: Creating and maintaining dynamism in the classroom*. Address to Faculty Assembly, Ramapo College of New Jersey.
- Gonsalves-Domond SV (2002) *Recommendations for fostering academic success*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Gross Davis B (2009) *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hammond ZL (2014) *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Hooks B (1994) *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Howard J (2015) *Discussion in the college classroom: Getting your students engaged and participating in person and online*. New York: Wiley.
- Kleinfeld J (1975) Effective teachers of Eskimo and Indian students. *School Review*, 83: 301–344.
- Ladson-Billings G (2009) *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Love B (2019) *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Lowman J (2000) *Mastering the techniques of teaching*, 2nd edn. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lu A (2024) Faculty and staff are feeling anxious, depressed, and burnt out, study says. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 December. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/faculty-and-staff-are-feeling-anxious-depressed-and-burnt-out-study-says>
- McMurtie B (2024) Why Generation Z gives these professors hope. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 December. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-generation-z-gives-the-se-professors-hope>

- Pacansky-Brock M, Smedshammer M, Vincent-Layton K (2022) In search of belonging online: Achieving equity through transformative professional development. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 12: 39–64. <https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2022.12.0.04>
- Roberts NS (2023) An ethic of abolition: Becoming educational sanctuaries. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 43(1): 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce202342786>
- Robinson K (2006) Do schools kill creativity? TED Talk, February. https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity
- Robbins H (2025) The classroom is not your living room. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 January. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-classroom-is-not-your-living-room>
- Schwieger F, Gross E, Barberan L (2010) Lessons from the culturally diverse classroom: Intellectual challenges and opportunities of teaching in the American university. *College Teaching*, 58(4): 148–155. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25763431>
- Stangor C, Frantz S (2025) *Principles of social psychology*. Boston, MA: Flat World.
- Stravredes T (2011) *Effective online teaching: Foundations and strategies for success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Webb N, Barrett LO (2014) Student views of instructor–student rapport in the college classroom. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 14(2): 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v14i2.4259>
- Weimer M (2002) *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wilkerson I (2020) *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. New York: Random House.
- Wilson LB, Goodson L (2021) *Online teaching at its best: Merging instructional design with teaching and learning research*, 2nd edn. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ybarra S (2024) *Empowering faculty vitality and mitigating burnout through generative AI in higher education*. In: *Advances in educational technologies*, pp. 281–308. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-1351-0.ch014>

