

Faculty and Student Perspectives of Critical Pedagogies of Care in an Arabian Gulf Liberal Arts University

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Culturally and historically sensitive material and highly diverse student bodies challenge educators in the higher education classroom. Transformative and empowering pedagogies address how different types of learners may experience sensitive material. Critical pedagogies of care create supportive educational environments, compassionate teaching practices, and empower students through diversified content. Pedagogies of discomfort, a subset of pedagogies of care, push educators and students to leave their comfort zones, recognize the non-neutrality of educational processes, and confront the discomfort of challenging knowledge. When applied correctly, these pedagogies promote critical thinking and transformative action, and counter the neoliberal and white supremacist values that often exist within the classroom. Using around 1900 survey responses and 40 in-depth interviews with students and faculty, this research studies the question: to what extent are critical pedagogies of care enacted and experienced at a global liberal arts college in the Arabian Gulf?

INTRODUCTION

In diverse higher education environments, discussing historically traumatic events like the COVID-19 pandemic, Arab Spring, or the colonization of Palestine, can prove complicated for educators. Students often have troubled relationships with such knowledge and educators can do real harm when they do not consider troubled relationships in their teaching. Without deliberate care, such discussions can cause students' disengagement and trauma. Inclusive classrooms comprise students with varying exposure to "troubled knowledge," which pertains to a distressed history that students possess that can trigger emotions of grief, guilt, anger, or failure due to their involvement in communities tied to distressing histories. The goal is creating intellectually stimulating yet safe environments for learners. In addition, addressing such knowledge can dismantle inequitable structures as students analyze such structures and associate them with the causes of traumatic histories. Pedagogies fostering transformative, empowering, and transgressive educational experiences help students and teachers recognize and dismantle social inequities (Zembylas, 2013; Giroux, 2021).

Research within the Scholarship for Teaching and Learning (SoTL) often highlights exceptional teaching as including the educator's "ability to care and enact their practice of a caring pedagogy" (Walker-Gleaves, 2019, p.94). This study benefits from the SoTL commons, the conceptual space in which a community of education stakeholders exchanges ideas and evidence-based research (Gilpin & Liston, 2009, p.1). Using the pedagogical imperative concept (Shulman, 2002), this research focuses on student and faculty perspectives of pedagogies of care and discomfort. This work highlights ethical obligations within SoTL to not only focus on narrowly defined best practices, but to consider the wider impact and consequences that work in education has on students. Findings offer insights into addressing troubled knowledge with care and discomfort, fostering evidence-based transformative education.

Key to effective education are pedagogies of care and discomfort. Pedagogies of care involve the capacity and obliga-

tion of educational institutions to create supportive contexts, and to train educators to adopt caring practices and relate content to diverse contexts (Zembylas, 2017). A subset of pedagogical caring drawing academic attention is the pedagogy of discomfort; a pedagogy first introduced by Boler (1999) urging educators and students to step out of comfort zones, acknowledge educational processes' non-neutrality, and challenge neat constructions of difference by staying in the discomfort tied to troubled knowledge (Waks, 2015). The Core Curriculum at New York University Abu Dhabi aims to foster equality, justice, and peace, encouraging students to address global complexities through problem-solving (New York University Abu Dhabi, n.d.). This research explores how pedagogies of care and discomfort contribute to this objective in a diverse educational setting by exploring student and faculty insight into how and when such pedagogies are used in the Core Curriculum at New York University Abu Dhabi. Insights will inform faculty training and discussions on teaching troubled knowledge in higher education. This research studies the question: **how are critical pedagogies of care enacted, experienced, and perceived within the Core Curriculum at a global liberal arts college in the Arabian Gulf?**

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Pedagogies

With foundations in the work of Paulo Freire (1970), critical pedagogy is an emancipatory approach aiming to liberate students from oppressive systems and ideologies by fostering critical reflection and agency in restructuring the world around them. Rooted in social justice principles and engaging with the fundamentals of "what education is about, who it is for, and how it is done," (Smith & Seal, 2021, p.3), critical pedagogy aims to question and dismantle a presumed natural order of social positions and power (Shor, 2012) by teaching students knowledge creation and evaluation. Within the Arabian Gulf, the rapidly developing higher education industry must tackle challenges in incorporating indigenous educational needs while integrating the diverse influx of international students (Costandi et al., 2019). Critical pedagogies

ensure students connect their education with their cultural and geographical contexts, preventing disconnection and fostering purpose in restructuring their societal contexts.

Liberal Arts in the Arabian Gulf

The liberal arts model of education has a powerful and often positive impact on students and the society in which they live (Detweiler, 2021). By nurturing a diverse range of skills, students engage in specialized pursuits within a rich, often residential, educational community. Emphasizing development of the “whole person” necessitates practices like active dialogue between students and faculty (Roche, 2010). The Arabian Gulf has seen a recent increase in global liberal arts branch campuses as the petrodollar boom spurred significant investments in academic infrastructure (Al-Shobakky, 2008). However, harmful stereotypes about education in the Gulf are common as Western critics often create homogenizing stereotypes about the countries and their people as illiberal, condoning human rights abuses, and restricting academic freedom (Vora, 2018). As such, literature often focuses on higher level discussions of the role of liberal arts and critical pedagogies in the Gulf, as well as the experiences of educators navigating stereotypes and realities in the region (Constandi et al., 2019; James & Shammas, 2018; Raddawi & Troudi, 2018; Telefici et al., 2014). Scant literature focuses on students’ perspectives on critical pedagogies of care in the region. This study addresses this gap by exploring student and faculty interactions within pedagogies of care and discomfort that are important to the transformative potential of liberal arts, considering the nuanced context of the Gulf region. The liberal arts model is key for critical pedagogy, building knowledge and critical thinking that challenges prevailing power structures, particularly in diverse Gulf schools with large international student populations.

Critical Pedagogies of Care

The ethics of care, rooted in Nel Noddings’ (1984) assertion of care as a recognized moral philosophy, has evolved into a pedagogy of care, where care holds a foundational role in pedagogical relationships (Noddings, 2012). This approach, grounded in the idea that caring underpins morality, makes relationships, especially that of teacher and student, ethically fundamental. The teacher-student dynamic reflects this care ethic. When done properly, it holds importance as a formative relationship in the social development of the student.

Noddings (2012) notes that two roles appear in such relationships: the “one-caring” and the “cared-for.” However, these roles are rarely mutual, especially in teacher-student relationships. The “one-caring” is responsible for hearing and understanding the expressed needs of the “cared-for” and responding positively to that need. If a positive response is not feasible, the carer must still respond to sustain the relationship. Teachers must be aware of students’ expressed needs (hooks, 2014) instead of assuming them. Anchoring the teacher-student relationship in morality and positive intent enables a pedagogy of care. The pedagogy of care deems caring ethics a teaching imperative, obligating educators to foster classroom environments where they address each student need, regardless of the feasibility of an immediate response. This approach translates care ethics theory into actionable classroom behavior, cultivating mutual respect that spurs critical thinking and transformation in students. Such pedagogies infuse empathy into education, countering the “entitlement mindset” (Zhou, 2022)

and encouraging students to engage deeply, take intellectual risks, and challenge themselves (Pedler et al., 2022). Responsive care pedagogies challenge neoliberal and white supremacist value that are often present in classrooms (Mehrotra, 2021). Students learn better when they are cared for in this way.

However, despite nurturing meaningful relationships and dialogue (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016), care-based pedagogies risk becoming an excuse to avoid critical discussions related to cherished beliefs (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). Intellectual discomfort is crucial to the academy. Consequently, pedagogies of discomfort have emerged as a subset of critical care pedagogies (Porto & Zembylas, 2022; Keddie, 2022; Millner, 2021), extending the definition and practice of caring *critically*.

Ethics and Pedagogies of Discomfort

Foucault’s interpretation of discomfort pertains to the unease linked to “our positionality and embeddedness within regimes of power/knowledge” (Knittel, 2019, p. 380). This discomfort often arises from discussing traumatic events, overwhelming individuals to a point of fear, vulnerability, and helplessness (Doughty, 2020). In this situation, the student cannot learn. In education, Foucault’s notion of discomfort becomes a tool for learners to question their cherished beliefs and emotions when confronting troubled knowledge. As learners progress through education, they become increasingly self-aware and find it harder to remain in absolute agreement with themselves (Foucault, 2007). Piaget’s (1975) theory of cognitive disequilibrium also supports this concept, highlighting how children confront contradictions and inconsistencies in knowledge structures. Boler’s work (1999) on the ethics of discomfort builds upon these ideas, especially in relation to information that challenges established thought patterns.

Practicing ethics of discomfort in the classroom nurtures individual and social transformation. Discomfort is welcomed and nurtured to pave a “turbulent ground on which to critique deeply held assumptions about ourselves and others” (Zembylas, 2017, p.9). The turbulent grounds are not obstacles to students’ trajectories, but mechanisms to enhance their reflection and awareness while engaging with educational content. Ensuring student safety, this ethic encourages students to move beyond uncritically adopted beliefs, often sustained by “inscribed habits of (in)attention” (Boler, 1999, p.180). By shifting away from comfortable but unexamined identities, students can genuinely engage with subject matter and their place within it. This productive ambiguity allows them to use discomfort as a catalyst for individual and social transformation, without the burden of guilt or defensiveness. The objective of this transformation is not to change students’ values but to foster impartial self-interrogation that can subsequently influence broader social dynamics.

Pedagogies of discomfort, as introduced by Boler (1999), foster impartial self-reflection and transformative learning by creating classroom environments welcoming to emotion. In this method, educators and students embrace their vulnerability and dependency on others, de-centering themselves by accepting the unease of teaching and learning (Zembylas, 2017, p.12). The pedagogy of discomfort does not impose transformation nor immobilize students. Instead, it liberates them from entrenched beliefs, allowing them to discover knowledge without self-imposed barriers (Keddie, 2022; Stewart & Gachago, 2022). By confronting the suffering and troubled knowledge of their communities and others, students develop an active empathy (Boler, 1999)

that transcends mere sentiment, retaining a productive quality that propels action (Zembylas, 2017). Research has explored the stages of pedagogical discomfort, including questioning between educators and students (Robinson, 2021), an enhanced comprehension of systemic oppression's effects (Zembylas & Boler, 2002), and a willingness to engage with diverse perspectives (Salomons, 2020). Thus, pedagogies of discomfort use unsettling emotions and classroom practices to confront troubled knowledge and challenge beliefs, enabling learners to become agents of social change and increasing the potential for transformation in education. However, the nuanced interplay of pedagogies of discomfort within the Arabian Gulf's educational framework remains unexplored in existing literature. Given the potential of pedagogies of discomfort in developing cultural awareness and critical thinking, understanding how such pedagogies are employed in New York University Abu Dhabi will provide insight into their value and use in the unique context of the Arabian Gulf.

METHOD & METHODOLOGY

This research aimed to observe the ways in which critical pedagogies of care are enacted, experienced, and perceived within the Core Curriculum at a global liberal arts college, New York University Abu Dhabi, in the Arabian Gulf. Established in 2010, New York University Abu Dhabi is the first branch campus of its main campus in the region. Hosting around 2500 undergraduate students from over 125 nationalities in a dedicated campus (New York University Abu Dhabi, n.d.), the university delivers general education across a wide range of courses addressing significant societal and global challenges, from orientalism to graphic violence. Students must take six of these courses as part of their graduation requirements. The Core Curriculum, within which interdisciplinary education is delivered, is highly likely to have sensitive material embedded within it. As a result, the effectiveness of the curriculum benefits considerably from critical pedagogies of care given the diversity of the students. The research question was approached using a narrative inquiry methodology, involving data from approximately 1900 student answers to Study Away applications from the Academic Year 2021-2022 and 40 interviews—25 with students and 15 with faculty—on their experiences and perceived impact of critical pedagogies of care in the Core Curriculum.

Narrative Inquiry Methodology

This research pursues a narrative inquiry methodology, which delves into lived and shared stories to understand human actions and experiences (Goode, 2023). This method expands the notion of "truth" and notions of "possibility" through a focus on human diversity and difference (Thomas, 2012) making it well-suited for exploring the complexities of care and discomfort experiences in the classroom. It delves into individual experiences while also acknowledging the interplay between personal experiences and relational dynamics. Given the relational nature of pedagogies of care and discomfort, narrative inquiry is a fitting approach to authentically capture these pedagogies in research.

The study revealed that participants had multiple narratives which did not always merge into a single narrative of care or discomfort. Instead, the many stories came together to inform the complex perception of care that participants held as students and teachers at a global liberal arts university in the Arabian Gulf. The methodology employed was therefore most suitable in accommo-

dating the diversity of experience within a single context. Given the focus on pedagogies of care and discomfort in the context of New York University Abu Dhabi as opposed to the context of individuals, the researcher adopted a sociocultural narrative stance, primarily analyzing narratives in conversation with one another (McAlpine, 2016). For this reason, findings are representative of themes found across data collected, as opposed to individual narrative cameos of participants. Each phrase in both interviews and survey responses was treated as a discrete coding unit, typically consisting of a few words or a sentence, enabling a detailed analysis of the textual data to capture specific ideas, themes, or sentiments expressed by participants.

In-depth Interviewing

Understanding the complexities of care and discomfort in the classroom necessitates exploring the unobservable mental and social models individuals navigate in their lived experiences. This approach, termed the "thick story" by Niobe Way (2011), involves a deep exploration of how culture shapes behavior by going beyond anecdotes to uncover the development of critical consciousness. To achieve this, interview strategies were adopted from Gerson & Damaske (2020), such as moving from deductive interview preparation to inductive data collection, using theoretically-informed research protocols, and understanding contradictions as insights into social and cultural conflicts. These strategies assist in identifying novel insights about social systems, relationships, and institutions within interview data.

With IRB approval and informed consent of participants, forty semi-structured interviews were conducted to better understand the nuances behind study away application answers and remove possible bias from students when answering a university questionnaire related to their study away eligibility. Conducting interviews with both students and faculty provided perspective on the translation of intent to impact through such pedagogies, as well as comparisons of the impact of different approaches to teaching troubled knowledge. Interview questions covered classroom experiences with troubled knowledge, responses evoked by implemented pedagogies, and faculty intentions behind pedagogical decisions and practices (see Appendix A and B).

The narratives of participants were drawn by first informing participants that the interviews pertain to experiences of care and discomfort in the Core Curriculum. They were then asked to recall significant anecdotes within these experiences. The interviewer talked through individual events with the participant, discussing how they situated their experiences into their educational journey. Throughout the interview, participants were asked for additional details about their recollections, to clarify emotions and ambiguous details, and avoid bias in the final research paper.

Following the interviews, the stories were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through thematic coding, including codes such as "avoiding discomfort" and "humanizing students/faculty," among others. Codes were derived from repeated phrases and phenomena described by participants during the interviews. To ensure accuracy and authenticity, participants were given a rough draft of how their narratives were used. The researcher also conducted an informal presentation of results open to critique and feedback via direct or written communication. This presentation was accessible to all students and faculty at New York University Abu Dhabi to maintain confidentiality of participant identities and encourage open dialogue.

Study Away Survey Data

Students at New York University Abu Dhabi are able to spend up to two semesters of their undergraduate degree studying abroad at one of the global sites of the university. A vast majority of students opt to take at least one semester of study away in the course of their degree as financial aid often covers related expenses. University approval for studying abroad is obtained by completing and evaluating a survey. This survey includes essays on the selected global study site and short answer questions about Core Curriculum courses that prompted students to question their assumptions or values. Students are informed of which parts of the survey are not influential for the approval of their study away request and are solely for university data collection. Although these questions are included in the study away survey, students are assured that their responses will not impact their study away placement. Responses to the following question were reviewed:

What is the Core class that caused you to think most deeply and/or question assumptions or values you held? How did it achieve that?

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to use the data, the researcher received a spreadsheet containing approximately 1900 anonymized responses from students' study away surveys conducted between the academic years 2021-22. Using the data analysis software MaxQDA2022, the responses were analyzed to identify prevalent words and topics across the dataset, capturing overarching trends. Additionally, unique words and phrases were highlighted to pinpoint divergent responses. Manual coding was conducted on only 500 responses as no new codes emerged after analyzing 300 responses and considering the time constraints of the research project. This process, along with the broader word frequency analysis, offered insights into the study away answers at both macro and micro levels. Categories for manual coding were established through exploratory data analysis of the entire dataset using MaxQDA, with adjustments made as the researcher delved deeper into indi-

vidual responses. A thematic analysis of the data was conducted using MaxQDA to identify recurring patterns and ideas, focusing on the distribution and frequency of codes within specific themes. Subsequently, a content analysis was performed to verify that the thematic analysis captured nuances effectively without oversimplification. This approach presents a comprehensive analysis reflecting the perspectives of survey participants regarding the pedagogies within the Core Curriculum at New York University Abu Dhabi.

RESULTS

Study Away Data

Student answers to the question "what is the Core class that caused you to think most deeply and/or question assumptions or values you held? How did it achieve that?" were overwhelmingly indicative of transformative experience in Core classes, as approximately 83% connected Core classes to experiences that challenged their established modes of thinking and heightened their awareness about studied subjects. Thus, students approach the Core Curriculum expecting to confront content and pedagogies that challenge their cherished beliefs and offer new perspectives. The Core Curriculum of New York University Abu Dhabi, designed as a platform for students to explore timely global issues (New York University Abu Dhabi, n.d.), reinforces the expectation of students' engaging with troubled knowledge.

As critical thinking is emphasized in numerous responses, it can be inferred that students do not solely encounter new content that heightens their awareness; rather, they receive support to develop critical thinking skills and independently arrive at new conclusions in these courses. This inference is supported by the frequency analysis.

Figure 1 illustrates the 25 most prevalent words found in the entire dataset of study away responses. A word frequency analysis provided the occurrence rates (rounded to the nearest percentage) of the most frequently used terms which were: "think" (66% of all responses), "question" (54%), "understand" (50%), "learn" (47%), and "different" (45%).

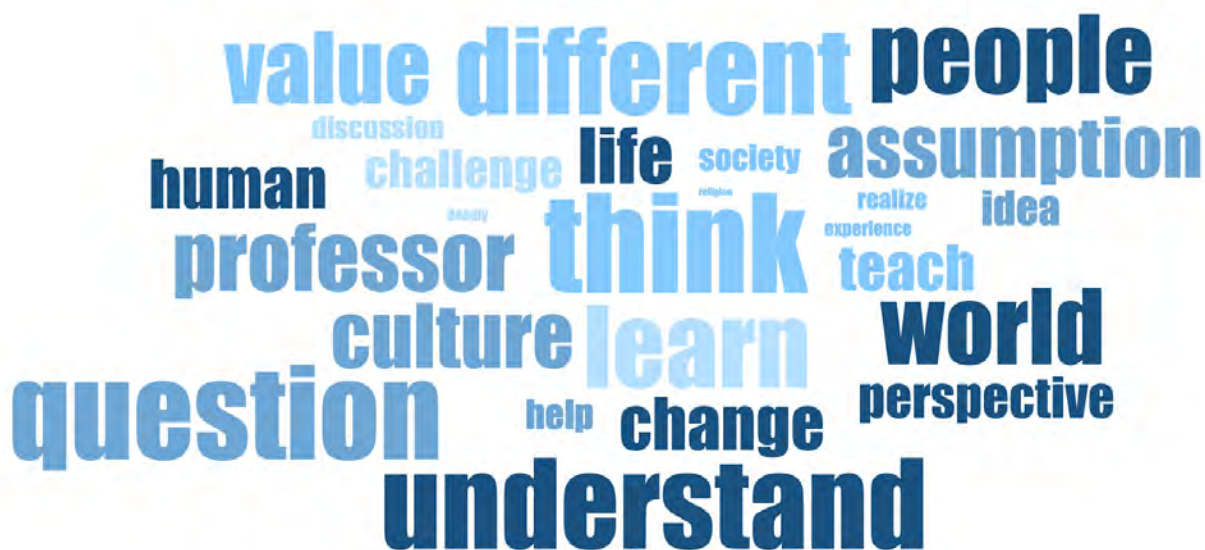


Figure 1. Twenty-five most common words in the entire study away data set, English stop list applied. Word cloud generated using MaxQDA2022.

Once again, the Core is seen as a space in which students are given ample opportunity to think critically and question the foundations of cherished beliefs. “Think” was most prevalent in contexts such as thinking deeply, changing ways of thinking, and being taught how to think. “Question” predominantly centered on discussing questions addressed by the Core or how it encouraged them to challenge cherished beliefs. “Understand” indicated improved comprehension of subjects. “Different” was multifaceted, often associated with classroom diversity in perspectives, backgrounds, altered thinking after the course, and varied teaching methodologies. An impressive 87% of the 500 random survey responses described a transformative educational experience in the Core. While the word transformative was not of the most frequently used words in the survey responses, answers coded as a “transformative educational experience” referred not only to deeper or more critical thinking but also to a significant shift in students’ innate beliefs, identity, or perspective of the world. A vast majority of students mentioned this as an integral and valued aspect of the Core Curriculum, while the other 13% did not refer directly to any such shifts. The interviews with students and faculty delve into the pedagogies that lead to this perception and experience in the Core Curriculum.

Student interviews

Using interview data, this research explores student perceptions to observe how care-based pedagogies and discomfort tackle troubled knowledge and shape transformative learning environments that challenge beliefs and reshape thinking. The interviews revealed the intertwined nature of pedagogies of care and discomfort, as well as the nuance in what students considered to be “caring.” Four main themes emerged from the codes produced in student interview analysis in response to the research question: humanization and vulnerability, disagreement in incorporating discomfort, inclusion through care and discomfort, and care as a catalyst for discomfort.

Humanization and vulnerability; a two-way street

Students identified several practices that they believed facilitated discussions of troubled knowledge in the classroom such as faculty remembering and valuing students’ work and organizing a face-to-face classroom layout for discussions. Connecting such acts of care was the fundamental sense of “humanization” within the classroom, encompassing both the faculty member and the students. Interviews were coded for humanization based on instances where students and faculty acknowledged and valued each other’s multifaceted identities and personal experiences. Students mentioned the importance of being seen as contributing unique value to the subject matter, motivating them to tackle challenging topics.

It’s just knowing that the professor saw each of us as individuals, rather than a bunch of random students. That effort she was putting in, asking about our lives, made us more comfortable and willing to share.

Humanization fosters not just individual academic experiences but also cultivates deeper class-level engagement as each student recognizes their value in contributing to the subject matter. Many interviewed students spoke of faculty members meeting with students individually at the start of the semester to consult their opinion on the syllabus and the diversity within required readings. Acts of care often involved faculty members

recognizing students’ lives outside the classroom and empowering them to contribute not only their academic abilities but also their personal insights to the learning environment. Study away responses predominantly characterized the Core Curriculum as “transformative.” Student interviews revealed how pedagogies of care can establish inclusive and intellectually stimulating educational environments, fostering transformative engagement in the classroom.

The other aspect of humanization, that of the faculty member, was mentioned in 22 of the 25 student interviews. Students strongly connected a caring and transformative experience in the Core Curriculum with sharing vulnerable and humanizing experiences in the classroom with faculty in addition to the feeling of being valued as an individual. This gave students who were unfamiliar with such pedagogical practices an example to follow as they navigated breaking through the sterility of academic spaces and engaging in classroom discussions on a discomforting, yet transformative level. One student spoke of how a faculty member demonstrated to students the effective utilization of discomfort and vulnerability in the classroom, rather than solely instructing them.

We made a photo album telling the narrative of our history... At first, it was like, “why will this benefit me?”...I spoke about my family moving from Costa Rica to the US. I had no idea before all the jobs they had to do to get there... For some, it was very intimate to be sharing photos of family. Of course, the professor didn’t force us, but we wanted to... It changed the way we saw each other, but also ourselves. And we put so much effort into it because we want to keep it for ourselves and show our families and stuff. So it was like using that vulnerability to create something meaningful.

When asked what made them comfortable enough to share such “intimate” and “vulnerable” histories with the class, the student shared how the professor had shared their own family pictures and explained the process of choosing them and being open to learning about their own history. Speaking to how it blurred the lines between what the experiences students had to “leave at home” and those they could take into their education, the student shared how the class felt a deeper sense of purpose behind what they were studying, and became more committed to the learning within the course. Although students were not against discomforting pedagogies, experiencing discomfort in the classroom was occasionally unfamiliar to them. Observing faculty members demonstrate how to navigate discomfort productively provided students with the necessary guidance to do so independently. Often, the pedagogies that encouraged students to partake in humanization and benefit from it involved care in the form of faculty participation.

Transformational learning often necessitates discomforting emotions and vulnerability (Meyer & Land, 2003), but students interviewed were reluctant to be vulnerable with a professor who did not reciprocate. This was because students valued knowledge as co-created through a mutual acknowledgment of vulnerability, fostering valuable exchanges and deeper understanding among *all* participants. The following quote illustrates how students reflected on the absence of mutual vulnerability and its impact on their motivation and engagement:

I liked when I could see the professor as more human in class discussions, but I wish she would be more open about

her opinion, instead of acting as a moderator. I feel uncomfortable with the idea that professors go to class and they want us to share our opinions, and even though they have opinions, they don't say it out loud. How can we share if they don't? It creates a gap between us. And you can see their opinion in subtle ways anyway, like in the syllabus.

Students viewed expressing opinions as a risk that made them susceptible to criticism, which they felt was unjust to shoulder alone. As discussed by Zembylas (2015, p.170), "the power differential between teacher and student generates questions whether the student's vulnerability and exposure to discomfort is fully justified." By upholding a rigid distinction between student and teacher to avoid influencing viewpoints or imposing a "correct" standard, faculty inadvertently created a barrier that hindered students from feeling secure in being open and undergoing a transformative educational experience. One interviewed student who believed her opinions were "controversial" emphasized the importance of knowing "where everyone stands in class," enabling her to gauge the risks of sharing her opinion. Even when faculty humanized themselves and students, the positive impact was undermined by a one-sided dynamic of vulnerability that left students feeling disadvantaged and hindered their ability to fully engage in the learning process.

Students appreciated instructors who humanized themselves by admitting expertise gaps, sharing personal experiences, and engaging with content on the students' level. They did not perceive pedagogies of discomfort as something done to them, but rather as a mutual experience where both themselves and the faculty member felt discomfort and experienced growth as a result. Particularly among students from underrepresented communities, there was a deep appreciation for faculty members who shared similar backgrounds and openly discussed their struggles and achievements. This humanizing effort was regarded as an act of care that facilitated students' participation in discomfoting conversations. Vulnerability was a key aspect that made pedagogies of care and discomfort transformative for students. They found it meaningful when professors displayed vulnerability by "stepping off their pedestal," creating a nurturing atmosphere conducive to discussing sensitive topics.

Disagreement in incorporating discomfort

While students anticipated transformative learning in Core classes and expressed disappointment if not achieved, they differed on the role of discomfort in achieving transformative learning. All students valued care-based teaching, but contrasting views emerged on discomfort. Most students saw discomfort as crucial for transformational education, while some remained neutral, with no outright opposition. The main difference lay in their ideas about optimal discomfort levels and discomfort management methods in education.

Students from New York University Abu Dhabi welcome productive discomfort in the Core, recognizing its unique role in their learning journeys compared to other classes. Students at New York University Abu Dhabi embrace constructive discomfort and seek to blend it with care, valuing emotional engagement in class because, similar to the professor caring for them, it shows them that there is value in what is being discussed. Divergence arises in opinions about expressing troubled knowledge freely.

There was a Core on institutionalized racism and the class was pretty white. And the professor started with "have you

ever heard of it?" And this white girl says "yea, I've heard it exists. My boyfriend is taking a training module on it." And I was like, "are you serious? Why is the professor pretending that this is a profound statement? Why are we opening its existence to debate?" Some opinions just shouldn't be welcome.

When we were talking about abortion, I remember someone sharing a very unpopular opinion about it. I disagreed too. But the professor said "We don't need to force others to think like us. All opinions are valued here." And I think that was important to let everyone feel unintimidated, so we can actually have dialogue.

The quotes highlight the challenge of balancing care and discomfort in teaching with students recognizing the importance of discomfort in learning but holding diverse opinions on the balance within critical pedagogies. Some question whether the benefits of transformative learning justify exposing vulnerable students to potentially harmful beliefs. Faculty must try to encourage questioning beliefs without pressuring privileged students to change publicly while respecting marginalized students' rights to discuss and diffuse potentially harmful comments (Zembylas, 2015). Nine interviewed students noted faculty struggles with balancing discomfort, with some guiding students to rethink beliefs and others favoring a more open discussion of discomfoting topics. However, students still affirm the significance of engaging with discomfort as integral to their educational journey. This reveals the enduring commitment of students to discomfort and intellectual growth even through challenges or disagreements in their implementation within the Core Curriculum.

Discomfoting diversity and caring inclusion

Learners at New York University Abu Dhabi come from a diversity of educational backgrounds. Core classes, without prerequisites and open to all undergraduates, are tasked with bridging gaps in prior knowledge amongst students. Students valued the diverse, interdisciplinary nature of the Core and recognized professors for honoring students' unique strengths and using individualized learning approaches to accommodate diverse educational backgrounds positively. A first-year student shared his nervousness about being in a class mainly with fourth-year students, but mentioned how his professor leveraged this diversity to enhance classroom discussions instead of seeing it as a hindrance.

I was the only first-year in class with mainly juniors and seniors, but the professor made sure he validated my opinions even when they weren't as smart as everyone else. And he even asked to meet me in office hours and told me that he wants to hear what I have to say and that it would benefit the class and not to feel intimidated. And because he was validating me in class, everyone was really friendly and tried to help me also. So at the end, I was happy I was thrown into the deep end, because I grew so much in a short time.

During the interview, the student emphasized the professor's efforts to engage all students, and particularly the first-year student, to ensure that the material was engaging and that they felt productively challenged. By obtaining student input and involving the work of academics from each student's background in the syllabus, the professor created a more equal classroom as all students encountered the familiar and unfamiliar, regardless of year of study. Exhibiting care in the classroom by humanizing students and acknowledging their individual worth modeled inclu-

sion for students, similar to demonstrating how to engage with discomfort. Consequently, students viewed each other beyond labels such as fourth-year or first-year, recognizing and appreciating the distinct value each peer brought to the learning environment. The additional effort on the side of the professor speaks to the care involved in the execution and effectiveness of individualized learning. The first-year student, from a non-English speaking background and transmission-style high school experience, highlighted how his professor and classmates were instrumental to his confidence and adjustment to New York University Abu Dhabi when he initially felt undeserving of a place in the classroom due to its diversity.

As a space in which prior knowledge is not assumed, the Core exemplifies how critical pedagogies of care foster inclusion by addressing educational disparities. By connecting with students individually, faculty emphasize each students' unique value amidst diverse backgrounds and develop means of challenging students of all backgrounds. Student relationships are facilitated as a result of critical pedagogies of care in place of self-serving competition. Students appreciate the diverse and interdisciplinary nature of the classroom but stress the need for professors to have the right pedagogical tools to navigate and leverage this diversity, and see this being accomplished through critical pedagogies of care.

Care as a catalyst for discomfort

When inclusion was implemented as an act of care, students welcomed the discomfort that accompanied diversity, even when it challenged their own cherished beliefs. Interviews proved that care acted as a catalyst for productive discomfort, as opposed to sheltering students from it. Twenty of all interviewed students (80%) spoke of positive experiences with discomfort due to faculty use of caring practices. While there were the aforementioned disagreements about how discomfort was handled, most students appreciated discomfort when coupled with care. Two students shared experiences of coming to terms with what they felt were discomforting realities:

I was talking about my experience with a host family in Malaysia, and my host mother wanting me to iron everything and never wear torn clothes. And I attributed it to being a high-class thing that I was not used to in the U.S., but the professor told me to take a moment and try and spin the story another way. Maybe I come from a background where class is implied, and we don't have to act it out and so it was a form of privilege that I didn't need to worry about wearing torn clothes.

I was a big fan of Albert Camus till senior year. And in one class...I found out how he was Islamophobic against the Algerian independence movement and did not want Palestine to be free. It was the biggest shock in four years of university. He was part of my day to day and who I am. I didn't know what to do and immediately wrote an email to my professor saying, "I think this has been the most disastrous reading of my academic career." And my professor met with me [saying], "The big objective of taking Core classes is that you don't leave the Core class being the same person you were when you signed up; that some part of your life changes." And I think she was happy for me that my worldview somehow changed, but also, she was empathetic because I told her how much it meant to me. And she indirectly mentioned this idea to the class afterward and guided me to be more perceptive and critical in my thinking.

Taylor and Baker (2019) speak of discomfort as part of the larger process of dissonance - "the psychological reaction to inconsistency in two or more - thoughts, beliefs, or events" (p. 173) - that causes productive development of student thinking. The above examples illustrate how students become more understanding of why they are being put in discomfort as they see faculty tackling discomfort as a consequence and factor of dissonance. Faculty display empathy in challenging students' perspectives and identities, such as encouraging students to "try and spin the story another way." Reminding them of the benefits of discomfort, faculty embrace critical pedagogies of care that support students in their intellectual and emotional development. The second example highlights the student's trust in their professor's guidance in navigating discomfort as they "immediately wrote an email to [their] professor." The professor's response explains why the student felt comfortable reaching out and showcases the value in establishing a caring relationship with students to facilitate appreciation for discomfort as part of growth. Additionally, indirectly sharing the student's experience with the class initiates dialogue about discomforting perspective shifts and allows students to witness the transformation of their peers as encouragement to critically examine their own beliefs. Students are more willing to experience discomfort in class when they are guided to understand that it is due to dissonance and serves the purpose of growth.

Faculty Interviews

Although all 15 faculty members interviewed were not familiar with the term "pedagogies of care and discomfort," they spoke to their incorporation of such pedagogies in their classrooms. They mentioned often evaluating and reevaluating the effectiveness of their approach. The two overarching themes that emerged from codes were "humanization and building relationships" and "hesitance and discrepancy in discomfort."

Humanization and building relationships

Many themes in faculty interviews mirrored those in student interviews, particularly themes of caring practices like humanization and building student-faculty relationships. Faculty members were intentional in implementing caring practices. However, many faculty spoke of unexpectedly experiencing transformative moments as an educator due to humanization and relationship-building.

Before we talk about academics, in class or office hours, I make sure to ask "how are you? How are you managing your sleep?" And students are sometimes a little puzzled, like why do I care about them, but we are here to empower students. You want to build that relationship, so I get personal with them, without oversharing, and talk about my past struggles and theirs. So, they think "the professor is prioritizing me," they feel special and valuable. And they see me as a human with failures, which makes it easier to work through their struggles in the classroom.

I bring my son up in class sometimes, and once he had to tag along on a field trip. Students saw me interacting with my kid. I didn't think much of it, but it touched one of my students a lot. She told me, "I wish my dad was that way with me." At that moment, she wasn't a student that was talking about a child. She was a child and her father didn't give her something she needed. Those moments change you as a

teacher. You become more conscious of your responsibility to your students and their education and their lives. So it's healthy to think of each other as having different roles than student and teacher.

Faculty recognized the benefits of humanization, intentionally engaging in actions like asking about students' lives outside the classroom and sharing relatable stories of failure to foster understanding and build relationships through vulnerability. This aligned with students' desire for faculty to be more vulnerable in the classroom. While all faculty mentioned refraining from sharing personal opinions on sensitive topics, they acknowledged that this could be frustrating for students who prefer transparency regarding the instructor's stance on such matters. Therefore, faculty used caring practices such as sharing personal failures and openly prioritizing students' well-being to build trust with students enough to teach and discuss troubled knowledge without imposing personal opinions.

Humanization benefited both students and faculty, prompting a shift in faculty's practice and sense of responsibility towards their students. As students and faculty recognize each other as having roles outside of teacher and student, discomfort is both applied and received with intentionality and understanding for the vulnerabilities of each other. Care becomes the solid foundation upon which discomfort can nurture growth. By humanizing themselves, faculty indirectly invite students to share their own individualities and vulnerable experiences and engage in the process of "mutual humanization" (Freire, 1970, p. 56). As Freire (1985) asserts that "to transform the world is to humanize it," (p. 70) the significance of critical pedagogies of care as a gateway to humanization and transformative education is evident in experiences shared during interviews.

Trusting students with discomfort

While interviewed faculty unanimously supported caring practices, faculty varied in their willingness to encourage student discomfort. Overall, interviewed faculty hesitated to solely focus on caring practices, opting for care combined with discomfort to avoid coddling students. However, opinions varied on the extent to which discomfort was encouraged. Around 35% of interviewed faculty integrated troubled knowledge and discomfort into mandatory assignments, while others spoke of bringing troubled knowledge into the classroom and letting students choose their engagement level.

I teach on genocidal rape, and so I do have students who find it difficult to talk about things that heavy... I'm not out to put students in harm's way and risk their sense of wellbeing for the sake of developing critical thinking, so I try to give them options. But I also make the point that, not to patronize in any way, but the world is not a great place sometimes, and they can't always shy away from these troubling questions and texts. But I tell them that they are agents of their own learning and ultimately, the choice is theirs.

One of my assignments is that students need to formulate four questions about this topic that would trigger some controversy and disagreement in class. This makes them comfortable with that discomfort.

All faculty members valued a pedagogy of discomfort as promoting growth and critical thinking. However, some faculty members felt that discomfort needed to be incorporated as

essential to the classroom, to push students who would not otherwise choose it. While faculty members adopting either approach all agreed that care, humanization, and building relationships with students was an essential component to introducing discomfort in the classroom, they differed in their understanding of how care and discomfort translates into a transformative education. Some faculty saw the humanization and relationships built in class as preparing students to embrace discomfort as an integral aspect of their transformative education in the Core Curriculum. Conversely, others expressed concerns that mandating discomfort could jeopardize the caring practices and trust established in the classroom. Instead, they emphasized the role of trust in empowering students to decide for themselves whether they wished to engage with discomfort.

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This research aimed to understand the question: how are critical pedagogies of care enacted, experienced, and perceived within the Core Curriculum at a global liberal arts college in the Arabian Gulf? The investigation into faculty and student perspectives of critical pedagogies of care in education revealed both the complexities and necessities surrounding the implementation and impact of critical pedagogies of care in higher education. Critical pedagogies of care nurture empathetic and inclusive learning environments and foster students' personal growth alongside academic development. Critical caring incorporates discomfort in transformative learning. Recognizing similarities and differences between faculty and student perspectives is crucial in developing educational practices that prevent harm and promote reflection and action.

Survey responses and interviews revealed that students welcomed and even expected challenging discussions and troubled knowledge as a means to a transformative education. However, they emphasized the necessity of care in facilitating productive discomfort. When faculty participate in vulnerability, clarify the purpose of discomfort with care and inclusion, and foster humanization, students embrace the vulnerability of engaging with discomfort and value it as evidence of growth in their thinking. Purposeful education promotes positive emotions, greater commitment to learning and peers, and reflective and empathic capacities (Bundick & Tirri, 2014; Pfund et al., 2020). This enables students to lead purposeful and morally significant lives (Damon, 2008), motivating them to cultivate and employ their skillset to bring about positive transformations in society, focusing on vulnerable individuals (Zabenah, 2017). Similarly, humanization as an act of care is critical to transformative education as it "can transform structures that impede our own and others' humanness, thus facilitating liberation for all" (del Carmen Salazar, 2013, p. 128). As faculty navigate the challenges of introducing students to discomfort in the classroom, the above finding suggests that students are not barriers to critical pedagogies of care, and in fact desire them. This finding is significant in highlighting the imperative for institutions to deliberately incorporate such pedagogies into their educational frameworks, cultivating an educational environment that not only fosters values of empathy, inclusivity, and empowerment but also equips students with the necessary tools to realize their transformative potential.

Faculty seek to balance care with discomfort for a caring yet critically engaging education, emphasizing how humanization and

relationship-building facilitate transformative learning. Students' and faculty's value of humanization demonstrates that pedagogies of care and discomfort effectively deliver humanization in education. Yet, in light of building trust and vulnerability with students, faculty members hesitated and differed in encouraging discomfort into the classroom, highlighting the lack of an institutionalized framework for balancing care and discomfort. Considering students' receptiveness to challenging discussions and a transformative education and diverse responses to discomfort, faculty should be trained to responsibly introduce discomfort and handle diverse student reactions to this approach. To make discomfort productive, educators must be confident in their understanding of how troubled knowledge affects students and feel prepared to use pedagogies of discomfort while fostering empathy, self-reflection, and critical thinking (DiGregorio & Liston, 2022; Zembylas, 2018). This requires incentivized training and institutional support.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this research, there are limitations to the study. The small participant sample and focus on the Core Curriculum hinders the generalizability of findings. Including a broader range of student and faculty experiences across various disciplines, not just the Core Curriculum, would better represent how critical pedagogies of care are enacted and experienced in settings such as degree major requirements where transformative education may not be an explicit objective. Additionally, engaging university administrators, including Curriculum Directors, could provide valuable insights into the institutional frameworks that support or inhibit critical pedagogies of care. To enhance the depth of analysis, future studies might consider manual coding of the entire study away dataset. Incorporating demographic data and factors such as discipline, year of study, and home country could highlight intersectionalities in the experiences of pedagogies of care and discomfort.

This research underscores the significance of purpose-driven education, humanization, and critical caring pedagogies for transformative learning. While students embrace discomfort with care and purpose, faculty need training for responsible implementation. Informal faculty seminars and discussion groups could implement tenets of critically caring pedagogies by providing faculty with a network of support in discussing challenges and vulnerabilities in their teaching troubled knowledge with the aim of collectively constructing strategies of effective instruction. Fostering a culture of open dialogue and collaboration between students and faculty by occasionally inviting students to such sessions can promote understanding and trust, creating an environment where discomfort is embraced constructively. By addressing diverse needs, universities can foster meaningful growth, personal development, and positive social impact, cementing care pedagogies as a higher education cornerstone.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Approximate duration: 60 minutes

Notes

- The schedule is roughly in order, but subject to change based on the responses.
- Questions on experience based on year of study, classroom content, and other differing variables between participants is subject to the participant I am interviewing
- During the interview, I will clarify that by “sensitive” or “difficult” subject matter, I mean knowledge of a traumatic past including feelings of loss, shame, resentment, or defeat that students may carry from belonging to or participating in a traumatized community
- The consent form will be read by the participant at the beginning of the interview in order for them to provide their verbal consent, and the participant will be reminded that their consent includes consenting to being audio recorded during the interview

Questions about their experience taking Core classes at New York University Abu Dhabi

1. Could you tell me about the most memorable Core you have taken so far? Why does it stand out?
2. What do you feel Core classes accomplish within the university experience, given your personal experiences with the Core?

Questions about specific classroom experiences

1. Can you tell me about the most recent engaging discussion you had within a Core class?
2. Could you tell me about a professor who stands out when you think about your experience in the Core?
Feel free to mention as many or as little details about the professor’s identity as you’d like
3. Can you tell me about a time when you and your peers disagreed when discussing Core content?
PROBE: How did the Professor tackle this disagreement?
4. What did a heated discussion in a Core classroom look like in your experience?
5. Could you tell me about a time in which you felt your mindset or feelings changed during or after a Core class?
PROBE: Could you tell me about a time you felt as though your input made that happen to someone else?
6. As the Core at New York University Abu Dhabi is structured around tackling difficult questions and sensitive issues, could you describe a time you witnessed a class discussion that tackled such subject matter?
7. Could you tell me about a time you felt isolated within a Core class?
PROBE: How did you cope with that?
PROBE: Who was involved in that incident and the follow up to the incident?

Questions about general pedagogies used in the classroom and their perception of such pedagogies

1. What differences or similarities have you noticed between the Core and your major courses?
2. In your favorite Core class, what were some of your favorite memories?

3. How did your professors shape your experience with the Core?
4. Can you describe the best you've felt when in a Core class?
PROBE: And the worst?
5. How did you feel your Core classes did or didn't take into account your identity?
PROBE: Could you give me an example of that?

Questions about their educational experiences before coming to New York University Abu Dhabi

6. Could you describe your experience with teaching styles in high school/your education before New York University Abu Dhabi?
7. How would you describe the teaching styles at New York University Abu Dhabi in comparison to your education before New York University Abu Dhabi?
8. How would you compare the classroom discussions you had in your education before New York University Abu Dhabi to those in New York University Abu Dhabi?
9. What memory of a class discussion stands out to you from your high school experience?
PROBE: Does that ring a bell with any of your New York University Abu Dhabi experiences?

Census data questions

1. Age
2. Nationality/gender/other identities they feel are important to them (if comfortable sharing)
3. Major/intended major/possible majors
4. Country of study in high school

Finally: Keeping in mind that my research is on how professors in the Core tackle sensitive subject matter within New York University Abu Dhabi's Core Curriculum, would you like to speak about anything else you feel might be valuable for me to know?

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED FACULTY INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Approximate duration: 45 minutes

Notes

- The schedule is roughly in order, but subject to change based on the responses.
- Questions on divisional differences, classroom content, and other differing variables between participants is subject to the participant I am interviewing
- During the interview, I will clarify that by “sensitive” or “difficult” subject matter, I mean knowledge of a traumatic past including feelings of loss, shame, resentment, or defeat that students may carry from belonging to or participating in a traumatized community
- The consent form will be read by the participant at the beginning of the interview in order for them to provide their verbal consent, and the participant will be reminded that their consent includes consenting to being audio recorded during the interview

Questions about their experience teaching before coming to New York University Abu Dhabi

1. How would you describe your previous teaching styles in comparison to your current teaching style at New York University Abu Dhabi? Has it changed?

Questions about their experience teaching in the Core at New York University Abu Dhabi

First confirm the courses that they teach and the topics given what I've read about their course

1. Could you tell me about why you started teaching in the Core at New York University Abu Dhabi?
2. What made you develop this course? What was your aim?
3. **Would you describe any of the content within this course/s as sensitive or requiring care when teaching?**
PROBE (if yes): How do you tackle this content in the classroom?
4. How do you think teaching in the Core differs from teaching other classes at New York University Abu Dhabi, if at all?

Questions about specific classroom experiences

1. What would you describe as the most memorable interaction with a student in your time teaching in the Core?
2. Could you tell me about the last time you had to reevaluate the way you approached a topic or question from a student?
3. Could you describe how you handled an instance in which students disagreed about subject matter within your classroom?
4. Could you describe any instances in which students reacted to the material differently to how you expected them to?
5. **How do you navigate topics that are essential to your course, yet difficult for some students to digest?**
6. How comfortable would you say students are in tackling sensitive subject matter in your course?

- 7. As the Core at New York University Abu Dhabi is structured around tackling difficult questions and sensitive issues, could you describe a time you led a class discussion that tackled such subject matter?**

Questions about their pedagogy & perceptions of their pedagogy

1. Do you see yourself as following a specific method of teaching?
– (If yes) Could you please describe it to me?
- 2. How do you prepare to tackle sensitive subject matter in the classroom?**
3. How do you feel your students perceive the outcome of discussions on sensitive content in the classroom?
4. Could you tell me about your experience with training that you felt informed your pedagogy?

Finally: Keeping in mind that my research is on pedagogies of care and discomfort at New York University Abu Dhabi's Core Curriculum, would you like to speak about anything else you feel might be valuable for me to know?