

Pausing to be human in the neoliberal university: relational pedagogy and the politics of presence

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Abstract

When higher education is increasingly driven by metrics, efficiency and performative productivity, what does it mean to pause, to slow down, to feel... to be, simply, human? This opinion piece explores how relational pedagogy, grounded in presence and affect, offers a quiet but powerful form of resistance within the neoliberal university. Drawing on recent research and practice, I argue that pausing is not a retreat from the demands of academic life, but an intentional pedagogical act, one that re-centres connection, care and co-presence in our teaching and learning environments. In doing so, we begin to reimagine not only how we teach, but what kind of academic cultures we wish to cultivate.

Keywords: relational pedagogy, connection, higher education, presence, affect

Introduction

In higher education (HE) today, the relentless pace of work and the emphasis on metrics, outputs and performance leave little room for simply being, for pausing, feeling and connecting as human beings. The neoliberal university demands speed, efficiency and measurable success, often at the expense of relationships, care and presence. Yet, amid these pressures, there is a growing recognition of the value of pausing to be human (Lemon, 2023), an intentional act that invites educators and students alike to slow down, attend to affect, and embrace relational ways of knowing and learning (Garrett, 2021). Relational pedagogy, a theoretical approach that puts relationships at the heart of teaching, emphasises that meaningful learning emerges from authentic, respectful and caring connections between teachers and students (Bovill, 2020). Through relational pedagogy, educators may, in their classrooms and institutions, reclaim presence and connection with their learners. I draw on relational pedagogy in this piece, because it offers a powerful counter-narrative to the de-personalised ethos of the neoliberal academy. It provides a framework for reimagining educational spaces as sites of human connection and mutual presence, where learning is shaped as much by how we relate as by what we teach.

The neoliberal university and its challenges

The neoliberal university is often characterised by a culture of performance, competition and outcomes. It values outputs such as publications, grants, student metrics and employability rankings over the relational and affective dimensions of education (Mountz *et al.*, 2015). This environment drives academics and students to work at an exhausting pace, pushing for constant productivity while devaluing slower, more reflective, modes of engagement (Valovirta and Mannevu, 2022).

Such pressures may take a significant emotional and affective toll: teaching becomes a task to be completed; learning, a goal to be achieved. Encounters between educators and students risk becoming transactional rather than transformational (Franca *et al.*, 2023). As Quinlan (2016) highlights, this erosion of emotionally meaningful relationships in education diminishes the potential for learning to foster critical, empathetic and connected learners and educators.

The urgency to perform may stifle the very human qualities – the care, the vulnerability, the presence – that make education meaningful (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2021). It is in response to these conditions that the concept of pausing to be human gains importance.

What does it mean to pause to be human?

Pausing to be human is more than simply taking a break or stepping away from work. It is an intentional, affective practice that fosters presence, vulnerability and genuine connection within teaching and learning. As Bovill (2020) argues, co-creating education through relational pedagogy allows space for more human, responsive encounters between students and educators, where both parties participate as whole persons rather than isolated actors. Similarly, Lemon (2023) describes a ‘pedagogy of belonging’ that invites educators to slow down, attend to emotional realities and prioritise care in their practice. In this way, pausing becomes a political act, one that resists the relentless acceleration, performativity and dehumanisation that often characterise neoliberal institutions.

Pausing invites us to slow down and pay attention to the relational dynamics at the heart of teaching and learning. It means embracing affect – the felt, embodied experiences that shape how we connect with knowledge and with one another.

The importance of these relationships is increasingly recognised in HE literature (Bardorfer, 2024). A growing body of research shows that strong teacher-student relationships are linked to enhanced student motivation, engagement, academic achievement, retention and well-being (Eloff *et al.*, 2021; Kim and Lundberg, 2016; Leenknecht *et al.*, 2020; Snijders *et al.*, 2020; Xerri *et al.*, 2018).

Relational pedagogy in practice

Relational pedagogy offers practical ways to embody the pause and cultivate presence in the classroom, emphasising the importance of relationships and emotional connections in the learning process (Bovill, 2020; Kukulska-Hulme *et al.*, 2023). This might involve slowing down the pace of teaching, creating space for reflection and dialogue and actively fostering connections between participants.

Strategies such as co-creation, where students and educators collaboratively shape the learning process, accentuate relationality and mutual investment, vital for meaningful engagement (Bovill, 2020). Bovill's research on student-staff partnerships illustrates how shared ownership disrupts traditional hierarchies, fostering deeper affective and intellectual connections that enhance the educational experience (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011).

Embodied practices (such as storytelling), open discussions about vulnerability, or the use of art and objects, can also help create affective atmospheres (Clughen, 2023) that invite presence and emotional resonance. Quinlan (2016) underscores how attending to emotions and sensory experiences may enrich learning, deepen understanding and foster belonging.

By embracing these approaches, educators invite learners into an encounter that is not just cognitive but also affective and relational, a moment to be together rather than merely do together. Meaningful relationships are fundamental to effective learning (Di Miceli, 2023; Gravett *et al.*, 2021) and are essential for enhancing educational experiences and outcomes (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2021; Hagenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova, 2023).

Implications for institutional cultures

Pausing and relational pedagogy have effects beyond individual classrooms and, when cultivated institutionally, have the potential to disrupt neoliberal norms and foster cultures that prioritise care, connection and inclusion (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2021). However, embedding such values within HE institutions is challenging. The pressures of accountability, funding constraints and entrenched performance cultures often resist efforts to slow down and nurture relationality, reinforcing a culture of productivity and competition over care and presence (Mountz *et al.*, 2015). Nevertheless, recognising the affective dimensions of institutional life opens up possibilities for new forms of academic community and collaboration (Gravett and Lygo-Baker, 2024).

Pausing to be human invites us to reconsider what counts as valuable work in HE, emphasising the relational and affective labour that sustains teaching, learning and scholarly life. Central to this is acknowledging the fundamental human need to belong and form meaningful interpersonal connections (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). This shift calls for courage and commitment but offers a pathway to more equitable and human educational futures.

Conclusion

In a university culture driven by speed, output and competition, pausing to be human offers a radical alternative. Grounded in relational pedagogy and the politics of presence, pausing is a deliberate act of resistance and care that pays due regard to connection, vulnerability and mutuality in teaching and learning.

Drawing on the principles of relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020), I argue that embracing the pause can help us reimagine HE, not as a factory of metrics and performance, but as a space for genuine encounter and transformation. Embracing the politics of presence invites us to teach – and learn – not just as professionals, but as whole, embodied, and relational human beings.

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