

Confluences Conference 2025

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Title: Encouraging communities of care in embodied teaching and learning spaces.

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Abstract:

This research stems from a deep curiosity about the sustainability of our embodied teaching and learning spaces, in particular fostering communities of care for both learner and educator. Why has care become central in our learning spaces? How and why does it take up so much time and resources in (in)formal teaching and learning spaces? What are the responsibilities of educators to support, and where are the boundaries? What strategies exist to provide supportive communities of care for both students and educators?

Our contemporary educational environments are charged with embodied vulnerabilities (Durham, 2024), providing potential for educators and learners to navigate a range of challenges, together. Parsons and MacCartney (2025,) inspired by the *Ethics of Care* offer potential strategies to navigate these complex landscapes. Alongside this, I argue that embodied practise provides more nuanced opportunities for pedagogues (Smith, 2012) and participants to engage in the exchange between empathy and embodied vulnerabilities together, while encouraging students /participants to be agentic in their own care.

In this paper I will unpack concepts of *vulnerability-as-potential* (Parsons and MacCartney, 2025) and building a creative *community of critical care* (Link and Black, 2024), in the context of embodiment training in a drama programme. I will share an autoethnographic account of my own practise as pedagogue, specifically my observations facilitating a shared curriculum of contact improvisation across year groups.

Introduction:

I would like to share my gratitude to the Confluence's organizers, for this wonderful topic. It truly activated an existing curiosity of mine, and without the 'pressure' of a conference I may not have taken to opportunity to pause, reflect and deepen this curiosity through intensive academic discourse. When I first encountered the conference theme I immediately resonated with the question "*why does care take up so much space in the classroom*". Over the past few years, and acutely since covid, care has, in my experience, become more foregrounded in teaching and learning spaces.

My methodological approach for my paper today is based on using existing literature that engage with care in higher education, literature around building community, and the teaching of Contact Improvisation, to step into dialogue with myself through an autoethnographic process. With permission, I include in this paper some contributions from colleagues and students.

A limitation of the research I feel I should state upfront is, at this time I do not have ethical clearance to officially include student perspectives as this was not feasible within my preparation time for the paper. I do believe that the research will be more balanced and much richer with student perspectives included, and it is something I intend to pursue in future research.

Care in a Global Context:

My experience about the foregrounding of care is not unique and resonates with the world-wide discussion in education. Globally, an awareness of diversity, sensitivity towards the need for, and implementation of, strategies towards equity and inclusion has received focussed attention. Durham, (2024: 292) supports this, stating that "*...in recent years, we have become painfully aware of the vulnerabilities of bodies to structural and environmental violence and repression...*". She argues, that imbedded in the body are systems of oppression, domination and injustice, and that "*the body's vulnerability is yoked to the precariousness of institutions and the growing environmental, technological, and interpersonal risks to which we are subjected in our changing world...*". Drawing attention to the intertwined nature of these connections, Durham (2024: 293) argues that it "*...renders some bodies more vulnerable than others.*" I argue that these embodied vulnerabilities, show up even more pertinently in embodied teaching and learning spaces, where our bodies are the primary instrument.

Problem statement:

In global trends one can observe strategic curriculum renewal, towards a more inclusive, equitable and caring teaching environment. Though well intentioned, the application thereof in practise, is a lot trickier. Parsons and MacCartney (2023:114) argue that "*Faculty are typically aware of the need to express genuine and appropriate care for students. Long before the pandemic, teaching and learning publication encourage faculty to demonstrate care for*

students and argued that such caring improved student learning.” Bae-Dimitriadis, (2024), an associate professor of art education points out the lack of integrated implementation of frameworks such as diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the art curricula in the USA.

Navigating how to care, assessing student’s perceived needs, versus the expressed needs, is no easy task. Sills, points out that, *“It is important to care for students in a way that respectfully watches for and solicits their input, and also that turns an evaluative eye on ourselves, as educators. As DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) efforts in higher education have made increasingly salient, we all hold implicit biases through which we unwittingly prop up racism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, colonialism, ableism, and other systems of dominance and oppression”* (Sills in Parsons and MacCartney, 2023:116).

The argument for creating environments in which students can flourish (Parsons and MacCartney, 2023:117), is something I resonate with in my teaching practise and is also one of the core values of Stellenbosch University (SU). To understand how one can create such an environment, I argue you must understand who you are as facilitator, and who the student in your classroom is.

My Teaching and Learning Context:

I consider myself as a choreographer-facilitator-pedagogue, central to my work, no matter what hat I wear, I find myself navigating my way between these identities in my teaching and learning practise. Starting out as a dance scholar and developing my skillset in a broader performative context of Drama, I have always focussed on embodiment practise as baseline for all. For the past 20 years I’ve been facilitating learning at Stellenbosch University (SU) Drama department, specializing in movement and physical theatre as my main areas of expertise. In that time the students have changed in many ways, and of course I did too. Pertinent to my topic, the question should be asked: Who is the generation we are teaching now?

Through my own observations, I find my current students, clued in to their feelings, incredibly empathetic, easily overwhelmed, with an intense drive to ‘make it’. They can be impatient in staying with an idea, and have a very different engagement with, and awareness around technology than me. They are also now, much younger than me, and my sense of understanding their lived experience is sometimes not in tune. According to the experts, I’m teaching GEN Z ...also refer to as *Zoomers*. Dr Leslie van Rooi, Senior Director: Social Impact and Transformation at Stellenbosch university describe GEN Z as:

Tech-savvy and Digital Natives | Pragmatic and Realistic | Entrepreneurial |
Socially conscious: interested in the ‘lived truth’ | Individualistic yet Community
Orientated | Preference for Bite-Size-Information | Sceptical of Institutions

Most notably, Gen Z demonstrate an awareness of mental health, normalizing therapy, and self-care, yet report higher levels of anxiety and stress. Van Rooi (2025) states it so beautifully, that they are *'activated about care'*.

Together with this, what are the embodied vulnerabilities students in my classroom navigate today? My observations, either in class, or in casual conversation with students or colleagues, foregrounds the following:

Financial Insecurity, Food Scarcity, NSFAS Failing, Mental Health Concerns, Failing Parental Structures, Gender Based Violence, Racism, Inequality (for example first generation university students, different levels of schooling and academic proficiency), Instability, Age Specific Challenges, Navigating Diversity and Multiple Points of View.

Working with embodied practise as vehicle for teaching and learning and recognizing that we work with our bodies as instruments, these vulnerabilities inevitably show up in the classroom, weather we are intentionally acknowledging them or not.

Experiences and Challenges around Care in (In) Formal spaces:

In our small drama department, we work intimately with our students, through somatic connections, we foster empathy, play, openness and care.

One of the most challenging aspects that I find in teaching is that care is often required in the 'in-between' spaces. Between setting up class plans, facilitating session and the never-ending administrative tasks you find yourself noticing dynamics in the classroom being porous spilling into the hallways, on the steps outside the department.

Then there are the more intimate or confidential matters, the knock on the door to say hallo, a request for a check-in searching for growth in the academic discipline, life advise OR the moments when you are the witness to the dam wall breaking, and someone's life falling apart. Some part of the trust, vulnerability and permission to play that you nurture through embodiment in the classroom, finds its way into these in-between spaces, and the request is made for me to become a confidant, a parent, a psychologist, a friend, an advocate, a witness.

Sometimes this feels possible. Other times I feel poorly equipped to handle request for care. At times you simply don't have capacity as you are navigating your own life and challenges.

I often wonder what are the expectation of responsibilities on educators to support, and where are the boundaries? In trying to navigate this, and my own needs, I've begun to have this interesting relationship with boundaries. Depending on how much I must give my boundaries may be more or less porous.

Offerings by other researchers:

Parsons and MacCartney, argue *“Caring is something we can all do, but we argue that caring well requires more than the genuineness, good intentions, and positive feelings that “caring” tends to connote.”* (2023:114)

In their article they also sternly address *“the faculty”* on what they should do and offer strategies towards providing more appropriate care for students. This of course is a perspective from the USA, and in my context in RSA, my immediate knee-jerk response was that: Many of the things’ Parsons and MacCartney suggest ‘faculty’ should do are wonderful, but in my reality, this often boils down to the single lecturer. Overwhelmed by administration, while trying to listen and respond to the *‘expressed’* and perceived needs of students, finding that implemented structures are not supportive. For example, sending students to counselling systems (provided as part of student/staff wellbeing, by the university) only to find out that counselling systems do not respond. Of course, understanding your own overwhelm you realise that these systems may be completely overrun, understaffed and under resourced. Yet, we’ve still not solved the problem.

One of the small things I discovered that may speak to this need, is the creation of a creative community of critical care. In preparation for this paper, I discovered a thought-provoking article by Link and Black (2024), where they share practical strategies around creating community in Art education. Underpinning their discussion is in part, sharing their failures at and desire to create an inclusive learning environment. This ignited my curiosity as I deeply resonated with their concepts and found some were already imbedded in my teaching practices. Link and Black’s article, became a dialogue partner for my autoethnographic reflection around teaching and care.

Link and Black (2024:12) offer five practices they adopt in their work as educators:

“(1) building critical communities of care, (2) sharing our own mistakes, (3) fostering critical reflection, (4) learning from missteps, and (5) developing internal compasses.”

In their classroom spaces they argue that transforming the *“...classroom into an embodied laboratory space”* providing them the opportunity to commend good intentions; build a practise of engaging critically yet kindly and reframing mistakes as opportunities to reflect (Link and Black, 2024:12). This resonates with my teaching practise, and particularly our contact improvisation course for second year students and honours physical theatre facilitation component.

Contact Improvisation as a way of Inclusivity, Equity and Care:

There are several reasons to include Contact Improvisation as part of our curriculum. From the perspective of technical skill training, it provides opportunities to develop partnering abilities. Through methods of Improvisation and Serious Play, it is a tool that provides potential for creative ownership of a choreographic process. In addition, it holds the potential

of proving an environment where inclusivity and equity can be foregrounded. At its best, it is inclusive of ANY(Body), regardless of race, gender, ability, socio-economic status and so forth. It challenges roles, offering potential to transcend class, race, and sexuality, subsequently providing opportunity to develop self-knowledge into agency. As Horrigan so eloquently describes:

“Contact Improvisation is a richer and more varied practice because of the differences among us. The diversity of our individual characteristics allows for a great range of dance to emerge. One of the most beautiful aspects of dancing CI is that it offers us the opportunity to build reciprocal connections with a wide range of people, finding ways to connect and support each other.” (Kristin Horrigan, 2024:77)

In our curriculum at SU, Contact Improvisation offers potential for students to learn and practise skills of presence, listening & responding, empathy and care to one another. It offers opportunity for shared knowledge production and building a creative community of critical care.

In the last couple of years, I’ve included our honours physical theatre students into my second-year contact improvisation classes. The honours students partake to improve their skill by revisiting this curriculum for a second time, but this time as more advanced students, and as my co-facilitators. Reasons for combining courses across year groups are varied. As I get older, I sometimes get injured more quickly. I appreciate having a more knowledgeable body to co-facilitate and demonstrate concepts with. In a way this is part of caring for myself and my instrument. This way, one can demonstrate in more detail, offer a clearer understanding of techniques and creative potential of this form. Having postgraduate students as co-facilitators also prompts me to be more open around my practise, as they are a form of constant peer review for me. Having to explain my choices, decision, class plans, and growing my knowledge of this form with others.

For the postgraduate students it offers an opportunity to improve their skill in this form and be agentic in own journey of facilitation in a controlled environment. For the second years, it offers knowledge from more than one perspective. Sometimes the honours students are closer in terms of ‘lived experience’ of the second years, and bridge the gap between me and the second years

With this cross-curricular integration, I began to apply constructive alignment (Hailikari, et al., 2022:218) concretely as Teaching and Learning method, in part, to build a stronger sense of peer review and ‘how to’ critique. This began to translate into a more competent and thinking peer review processes in class. Students are not just saying what they like, but engaging critically with the product that is made while offering the safety and care of a creative community. In essence, it offers ALL involved opportunity to revisit knowledge along Britton’s (2013:319) “*learning as a spiral*”, to (re)engage with knowledge from multiple points of view.

Having the Contact Improvisation course constructed in this manner, I notice that it builds opportunity to encounter embodied vulnerabilities, as students from various backgrounds, diverse beliefs, gender, sexuality, ability, find themselves navigating a shared dance. Through engaging with the coursework students learn to work with care and empathy with another person, to literally step into their shoes. It also forwards a notion of failure as opportunity to learn (Brown, 2016:5; Link and Black, 2024:12), opening a space where you are available to consider your mistakes as opportunity to become curious about knowledge creation. Reducing the fear of failure, through empathetic engagement, allows for critical discussion about process and product, to become ways to practise HOW to engage one another (Link and Black, 2024:10) instead of simply dishing out critique. The somatic connection, and shared experience inevitably bonds students on a pre-verbal level (Dumit and Bjerre Jensen, 2024:338). In my experience, successful creative communities of care built through this engagement, value deep respect for one another, while engaging in playful creative exchange and vulnerability.

What I notice is that this bond, translates into (in)formal spaces. Agency develop in honours students to mentor and pass down skills, and second years seek out of a mentor-mentee relationships on more than one occasion. Students encourage one another to hone skills and to believe in their abilities. In essence a creative community, that care and critique appropriately, form across year groups.

Building a Community of Care- My autoethnographic accounts:

This idea of *sharing a journey of learning* is vitally important, and vulnerability creates one of the cornerstones to what I experience in my personal practice to be part of building a creative community of care. I'd like to share three short stories with you, from my experience as facilitator, colleague and human, that highlight three strategies that I found, and practise in building community in my context of embodied teaching and learning.

Vulnerability-as-Potential:

A few years ago, I found myself at the end of my rope. For various reasons I was seriously considering a career change. The load became too heavy, the need for care (of myself) and my students too consuming. While in this body-mind space, I found myself so out of energy that I began to drop my guard. The normal little bit of veneer, that I, at the time considered necessary between myself and students, I did not have the energy to hold up. So, I dropped my guard and found myself in a real place of vulnerability. My fear of course was that my vulnerability would be interpreted as weakness. Instead, I found my students responding with real care. As Van Rooi so beautifully suggested, they were '*activated by care*' (Van Rooi, 2025).

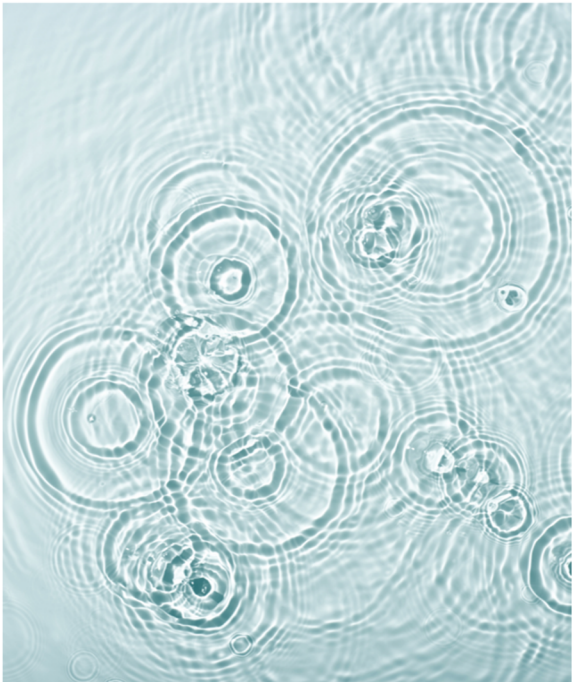
Something magical happened in this space of vulnerability. As I became more vulnerable, I became more present, in turn they became more present and open to play. This was not a once-off experience, it continued into the next year and beyond, with this group of students.

I found the response from this group so energizing and felt that they offered me so much of the care in needed at that time

I became very curious about this experience, as human and educator. I always thought I should have a measure of distance in place, but this showed me that my willingness to be vulnerable and honest created potential. So, I began to actively think of how I could include this as a teaching and learning strategy. I started to wonder about how Gen Z's fear of failure could respond to; or resonates with, this idea of inviting vulnerability-as potential (Parsons & McCartney, 2023:118). I argue that the way we play, vulnerably together in the classroom makes it possible for this play to translate into other spaces.

Kinetic Reflections:

Our community of educators also require care, but how do we find this? I offer a musing on a personal strategy.



REFLECTION
REFLECTION

20-05-2021

I walk for “coffee”....

Most days before or in-between teaching classes I walk for a cup of coffee...

I'm perfectly happy to make tea or coffee at work, but the walk offers me an opportunity to move, moving offers me the opportunity to think and organize my thoughts. To be inspired...to let creativity in. Or decompress after a difficult class/loaded moment at work.

I realised now that I do this as a ritual before teaching...almost like settling my mind (away from emails and administrative distractions) opening up, preparing for performance, ...the performance of teaching, finding and situating the appropriate energetic quality to facilitate, and the openness of soul to really hear and listen as educator. To connect to the now...

This ritual spilled over into a highly valued collegial exchange.

WALK AND TALK...

When Tumi and I became colleagues, it was a few months into national lockdown.

We met online during her interview process and only met in person about three months later.
We started to establish a ritual of walking for coffee...

Why?

Clearly, we've established my adoration of coffee! But also...

conversation was easier, it was moment to get out of the office, have a few seconds of taking in one another's faces in the 'safety' of fresh air.

To share the joy of motion, and the way it forwards thought in action!

This has become a staple for us, just last week we walked again, I was in a huff, talking through work things and walking sooo fast. Tumi reminded me, "slow down colleague, this is our time..."

Precious time!



Permission to Play - The story of *The Cactus That Is Yet to Be Named*:

In 2016-2017, the SU drama department was renovated. In that time, we were displaced to different location across campus. One venue was a shop we rented in the local mall, and in our rental space, we created a small black box theatre for practical work. A student group used a real cactus as a prop for a play, but after concluding the work, the cactus was never claimed again.

The unclaimed cactus became an agenda point at many staff meetings. What to do with the cactus? Clearly a problem to be solved. Eventually my colleague Amelda took pity on it and move it into her office in the mall. After the renovations the '*problem cactus*' returned with all the furniture and people to the drama department. It proved its resilience, surviving a few near-death experiences: surviving a few months of lockdown without water and the loving care of the office humans, then being cared for with dirty stage water.

Every time, *the cactus that is yet to be named*, was nurtured back with love and care by my colleague Amelda and ended up in the office we now share. I'm not crazy about cacti, yet, my office roomie took so much care of it, *the cactus that is yet to be named*, was here to stay.

One thing you should know about our office 3013 is that is the hub of creative chaos. At any given time, it is filled with bags and crates full of props, costumes and other devices to facilitate classes. It is fertile ground to any creative impulse! After lockdown, the cactus began to fulfil a new function...and one day, a new game began...

Robert Hindley, one of the applied theatre honours students, an intensely joyful, playful human, was dropping off and sorting through props and puppets from his work session in our office. As usual it was chaos, I was working on something at my desk and for some reason we

decided, together, to decorate *the cactus that has yet to be named*, as a surprise for my colleague Amelda Brand, an equally joyful, playful human. The purpose, to inspire some fun and joy in her day. A longstanding game began between the three of us. Each time one of us was at the office and felt like playing a bit, we would change something or redecorate the cactus and make a bit of fun. It was simply a bit of mischief in the hope to make someone smile or laugh in a particularly difficult time.

Robert graduated and Amelda and I continued the game. We would dress up the cactus in the beginning each year so the new first-year students would know how to find our office 'on the third floor by the decorated cactus', as we are undergraduate coordinator and timetable officer respectively. Our problem cactus became an object of continuous play, our original student, Robert (long since graduated) and Angelique Filter, a recent graduate, now gifted us little *Grommel* hats, specifically for the cactus. The little hats mimic characters from their new play *Grommels*, and in turn fill our space with playful potential and joy. So, the game continues....

The problem cactus, in need of care eventually became the object of creative play and shared joy. A way to provide care for one another by finding lightness in difficulty.



In conclusion, vulnerability, reflection and creative play in the context of embodied teaching and learning, have become strategies to invite, and nurture building community in my place of work. A way to enact care, within and beyond the scope of curriculum and educational structures and intentionally working towards a more sustainable teaching and learning environment.

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