

Book Review

A Pedagogy of Kindness

By Catherine J. Denial

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Reviewed by

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In *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, Catherine J. Denial makes a compelling case for changing the way higher education operates. As educators, she argues that we must move away from traditions of distrust, individualism, and strict authority, and instead embrace trust, agency, and a sense of belonging. Drawing on her extensive teaching experience, Denial redefines kindness as more profound than being nice or lenient. She views it as an ethical approach that can reshape the relationships educators have with their students and how they design assessments, classrooms, and institutions. Given the challenges in today's educational landscape, including post-pandemic fatigue, mental health concerns, and the growing need for equity (Rashid & Di Genova, 2022), this book is timely and necessary.

Denial is a historian and award-winning educator at Knox College in Illinois, and her book offers a human-centered approach to teaching that is concise and clear. The warm and approachable tone makes it appealing not only to higher education academics and educators but also to curriculum developers and administrators. Drawing from her personal experiences, Denial shares transformative stories from her classroom, such as using a “first day” survey to understand students' needs, and revising syllabus language

from punitive to collaborative. These examples emphasize that a pedagogy of kindness is more than just a collection of techniques, it is a perspective that recognizes students as individuals deserving of dignity and care.

At its core, the book suggests that kindness is an ethical discipline rather than a personal trait, building on traditions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000). Denial urges readers to reconsider systems that reward severity, performance metrics, and exclusivity. She frames kindness not merely as a personal quality, but as a practice based on trust and shared responsibility. This perspective is influenced by feminist theory, Indigenous viewpoints, and decolonial ideas, though these sources are woven into the narrative rather than explicitly cited. Denial's writing is engaging and emotionally impactful, but some readers may want a deeper dive into the broader discussions of critical pedagogy and student activism, particularly the recent campus protests demanding greater university accountability in policies and investments (Patrick, 2025).

Each chapter is framed around a theme: kindness toward the self, syllabus, assessment, and classroom. The introduction sets the stage for Denial's main argument that kindness must start with ourselves. She challenges the stereotype of the isolated academic genius and critiques the elitist structures in higher education, which often emphasize competition, status, and view students as potential deceivers. Practices like dialogue circles and inclusive syllabi prompt reflection not just on what we teach but on how and to whom, asking: who is present, who is absent, and why?

One of the book's most impactful points is its critique of the language and policies used in educational institutions. Denial highlights how course outlines often employ punitive language, such as referring to students who "commit offences," and instead advocates for language that is clearer, compassionate, and accessible. She even suggests collaborative syllabus design with students to promote a sense of agency and teamwork. While this idea is intriguing, it might not always be feasible due to time constraints, institutional requirements, and union policies, concerns that the book does not completely address.

Denial's chapter on assessment takes an interesting turn by introducing the concept of "ungrading," which aims to shift the focus from grades to the actual learning process. Denial notes that academia often assumes students arrive equipped with academic literacy skills, a view critiqued in higher education research (Wollscheid et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2022; Lin & Morrison, 2021). She advocates for greater transparency and emphasizes the importance of feedback as a dialogue. However, with the increasing use

of AI in education, Denial misses the chance to explore how digital tools might impact assessment practices (Xia et al., 2024). Similarly, while she touches on neurodiversity, a deeper engagement with how systemic mistrust shapes the experiences of Indigenous and racialized students would have strengthened the book (Battiste, 2013).

Denial's vision for the classroom is broad and rooted in the concept of "internationally equitable hospitality" (Bali et al., 2019), aiming to create an environment that accommodates diverse ways of learning and engagement. As she explains,

the instructor of a class is the host of a gathering and must think critically about the welcome their course offers to students all semester long. This means taking stock of the contexts and practices that make students feel invited into a space and those that leave them excluded (p. 82).

The book highlights that there is not a single model for participation, which is a refreshing shift away from Eurocentric expectations. Denial's practical advice helps students share their learning experiences in ways that feel comfortable and supportive. Importantly, she reminds readers that kindness is not permissiveness but requires humility, accountability, and a willingness to repair harm.

The chapter on kindness in classroom practice resonates strongly. Denial points out that the biggest barrier to embracing a kinder approach to teaching often comes from our fears: fear of change, fear of being vulnerable, and fear of losing control. She reminds us that kindness does not mean pretending everything is perfect, it involves acknowledging the complexity of situations, pushing back against a mindset that resorts to punishment, and creating systems that prioritize care. Her advice to "guard your yes" and to say "no" when necessary is a valuable lesson in maintaining boundaries and ensuring sustainability in our work.

In the closing pages, Denial emphasizes that "higher education needs to be kind – aggressively kind; determinedly kind" (p. 101). This strong statement captures the main idea of the book: kindness is not an addition to academic rigour, but essential to it. Overall, *A Pedagogy of Kindness* offers a meaningful and timely intervention into conversations around teaching, care, and inclusion in postsecondary education. While some ideas may feel idealistic or limited in scope, Denial's core message, to teach with kindness, is to teach with ethical responsibility, resonates deeply. Her reflections affirm that care is not the opposite of rigour, it is its foundation.

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