

Co-Learning 'Intersectionality and Social Justice' during Culture Wars

Written by Elena, Keshab Giri, Alex Godfrey, Aniela Marks Delgado,
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As the spring semester of 2025 began at the University of St. Andrews, our module (IR4589: Intersectionality and Social Justice) started with gloom and despair rather than the excitement of a new module with the opportunity to learn. A week earlier, Donald Trump, the newly elected US president, signed an executive order titled 'Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) Programs And Preferencing'. This executive order aimed to dismantle DEI initiatives within the federal government, asserting that such programs were discriminatory and not aligned with merit-based principles. Big Tech and private corporations also quickly followed suit by cancelling DEI programs. Critical race theory, gender, intersectionality, social justice research, and activism have been in the crosshairs of the 'culture wars,' making their way to the centre of far-right politics. Intersectionality sees oppression as a complex phenomenon made up of simultaneously intersecting systems of power – such as race, gender, class, age and so on – requiring focus on why/how/where/when they intersect to comprehend and address them fully. Even before the announcement, Intersectionality has long been the target of far-right (and far-left) political forces as it challenges the status quo more than any other theory (Collins and Bilge, 2020: 32-33). Unsurprisingly, DEI programs have been scapegoated for a wide range of problems—from economic troubles and waning global political influence to rising inflation, an uptick in crime rates, and even fatal aircraft collisions.

Despite the palpable shock and despondency reigning at the outset, we deliberately chose to remain vigilant and resist growing authoritarian, anti-intellectual, and regressive tendencies. We decided to speak truth to power via our mutual creation of weekly Intersectional Care Diaries. In *Intersectional Care Diaries*, the class would share brief individual reflections on intersectional oppressions in spaces around us, contemplating how care can be imagined in response. This was a voluntary, interactive practice to apply key themes of the module to real-world scenarios. These writings were scattered nodes of resistance in response to what Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994) call 'scattered hegemonies.' Here hegemony is decentralised and diffused so that it becomes easily embedded into our everyday lives. We explored power dynamics across spaces, scales, and levels, engaging with contentious political issues from intimate and institutional settings—such as classrooms and cultural venues—to broader questions of environmental justice, structural privilege, legal reform, and the lived struggles of self and marginalised communities.

Over the past few weeks, we have gathered numerous pearls of collective wisdom, prompting us to wonder—what if we wove them together into a piece of writing that captures the power of collective thought and the interconnectedness of our ideas? We have been exploring and thinking through intersecting systems of oppression, injustice and disadvantage. Drawing inspiration from these experiences, we pondered over what it could become if we also let our reflections and care diaries intersect in themselves, engaging in a chain dialogue of deliberation. Suddenly, the canvas was filled with numerous shapes and colours—connecting, reinforcing, empowering, enriching, and inquiring into each other in ways we had barely imagined. This collage of mutually constitutive reflections bridges our classroom dialogues with the political praxis of intersectionality and social justice at the local, national, and global levels.

This co-production was thus itself an act of resistance, an act of love and care for the values and principles of social justice that we hold dearly, and it was consciously embraced as an antidote to the politics of hatred, intolerance, and

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violence which often masquerade as deformed and distorted notions of love.

Love and care in the classroom

From abstract philosophical concepts to everyday praxis, love is omnipresent. Love means different things to different people and comes with its intricate dimensions, scopes, and properties. However, this omnipresence and seamless variety make it daunting to define and measure; it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Our conception of love and care in the classroom speaks to a shared commitment to ideas, values, and practices that we believe are valuable to an emancipatory politics.

Love has its powerful ways of binding us all, and to discover the untapped reservoir of goodness and virtue among us. It propels us to imagine the world beyond our self-contained, untested ideas. It doesn't necessarily mean that with love, there will be uniformity and unanimity. However, it guides us to navigate our differences with trust and generative energy, caring to learn and unlearn through the method of collectivity and dialogue. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2005) powerfully argue, love is both multiplicity and relational. Our class practiced the love and care for multiplicity, even when it manifested in seemingly contradictory articulations of ideas. The class itself exemplified when there was a legitimate concern in the class– Is writing about love and care the right thing to do when so much oppression going around the world? Extricated of action, could it bring any meaningful change?

Here, the love that we pledged to in our classroom emerged out of an unbridled celebration of who we are – our wholesome identities, varied embodied experiences, accumulated knowledge, wisdom, vulnerabilities, imperfections, ignorance, and our belief in the power of their synergy to enlighten and guide us within and beyond the classroom. In such commonality, we resisted the neoliberal allure of individual achievement, alongside the glory predicated on the zero-sum race and hierarchy promoted by our universities.

Care pedagogy builds on the virtue of love. Care flowing from love is healing and enduring. Our collective commitment to social justice brought us into the circle of love, and we started caring for each other as a part of our commitment to social justice. Social justice itself is, to some extent, an extension of care to the multiply marginalised community in a non-hierarchical and transformative way. Yet, as Shirin Rai (2024) reminds us, love and care come with the risk of depletion, burnout, and, to an extent, a lack of care for the self. As such, we engaged in conversations concerning how we care about our commitments to learning carefully, as the road to intersectional social justice is long and nonlinear. Rather than presenting care as a selfish, narcissistic activity, we proposed it as a conservation of energy for a long struggle and a thoughtful channelling of that energy– for justice is a marathon, demanding constant vigilance even when certain milestones are achieved.

The magnitude of this monumental task and stark reality began to dawn upon us immediately: How do we care and sustain ourselves to begin with when the academic environment is increasingly uncaring of us (Stehle and Thorson, 2024) and the topics we discuss, write, and care for? How do we continue to co-learn and write for/about marginalised voices when we are ourselves marginalised and sequestered, both in in our discipline and in numerous political spaces? How do we express our love and care for our community (acquired or constructed) when such 'expression' of love and care can be easily construed as a political and ideological threat? As a result, we distilled various curricular activities in and beyond the class (academic and activist guest speakers, weekly Intersectional Care Diaries, museum visits, movies, and documentaries) as a pedagogy of love and care into three pillars of praxis: knowledge/understanding, feeling, and action.

Tri-Pillars of Praxis: Knowledge/Understanding, Feeling, and Action

Knowledge/Understanding is a necessary first step to our commitment to addressing intersectional oppression; however, it is not a sufficient condition to bring transformative change. Over the semester, as a class, we invested heavily in whether our attempt to reflect and analyse critically within and beyond our classroom only reinforces the status quo, rather than problematising it. While we understood the value of critical reflections and perspectives on everyday and international politics, we were divided on whether or not this constitutes *only* a performative service to the deep politics of resistance. Maja Kutlaca and Helena Radke (2023: 3) suggest that performative allyship might

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even have negative impacts on marginalised communities, stating that an individual's motivation to 'virtue signal' overshadows the root of the issue attempting to be addressed. Performative activism can be identifiable as a generalised support for a marginalised group that only aims to increase the 'activists' image, whilst failing to deploy any valuable discussion or meaningful actions. As such, the exercises within this class could then fall into the scope of genuine allyship/activism, being that it aims to reflect over one's individual experience and utilise credible sources to connect our thoughts to tangible aspects of intersectionality. Intersectional care diaries aim to spark discussion among peers, creating thought-provoking discourse.

Yet despite many limitations, Aniela writes that taking part in this module has prompted deep reflection on her role in regard to social justice. Classroom work often feels limited by institutional boundaries; how does one bridge the gap between merely citing injustices and actively driving change? These reflections underscore the value of safe spaces for dialogue and the need to turn awareness into action.

Alexandra expands on the thoughts of Aniela, questioning whether or not the academic community has a responsibility to act on their research and education. Is learning about these experiences of injustice and educating yourself on intersectionality enough? Has our academic space, or other educational spaces globally, successfully applied our knowledge to "actively drive change", as suggested by Aniela? She further notes that we have, unfortunately, not applied our newfound expertise, but simply noted and spoken of the injustices that plague our mutually inhabited world. With limited funding and access compared to large corporations, both as individual students and as a module-collective, how can we actively drive change whilst studying? How can this particular module integrate social activism into learning through events and participation that encourage students to "turn knowledge and awareness into action," as suggested by Aniela?

Dominant knowledge and awareness, however, need to be critically dissected and interrogated as they form the basis for various social outcomes, including the marginalisation of various social groups. Elena challenged us all to rethink the dominant narrative of meritocracy promoted by our university. Classrooms are assumed to be equalisers and promote meritocracy, but the idea of meritocracy itself is a function of multiple privileges (socioeconomic status, cultural and linguistic advantage, gender, nationality, ability, and so on). Not only is the ease of entry to higher education differentiated by these privileges, but those students at the intersections of marginalisation attending such institutions face overlapping boundaries to achieving the highest. Requiring part-time employment to meet the needs of simple bodily subsistence reduces the hours available for study; studying in a foreign language can lead to marks deducted in essays; physical disability can hamper access to guest lectures and classes in old, inaccessible buildings. When such systemic barriers interact, they pose unique challenges for affected students, reinforcing the false meritocracy vaunted by universities.

Another pillar of a praxis anchored upon love and care, centres itself on going beyond the initial stage of knowledge and understanding. Sara Ahmed (2017: 10) invites us to consider that 'theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin.' Rather than objectifying the pain and grief of people by mining them like raw materials for manufacturing certain narratives of academic or policy consumption, staying close to the skin involves telling first-person stories of experience and grief, relating them to larger stories of oppression, injustice, and discrimination. We mulled over connecting our emotions to the grammar and syntax of oppression for powerful synergy and the politics of solidarity. Q Manivannan, in their guest lecture for the class, powerfully demonstrated how writing and expressing grief and pain can be a generative force in the quest for collective dignity, rights, and justice. Intersectional Care Diaries and in the reflective writing assignment in the module sought to mobilise collective reckoning of pain and grief into a generative force as a precursor to resistive actions.

The final pillar of praxis in our class included action itself. The idea was to build a community of feminist scholars and activists (Dr Katharina Hunfeld, Ms Hira Malik, Ms Livia Turnock, Mr Kindred Motes, Dr Wassim Naboulsi, and Q Manivannan), as well as learn by doing. These actions are to be theoretically informed practice with reflection, one where there is ongoing self-reflection, feedback, and integration. Philosopher Paulo Freire (1970: 51) described such praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.'

While such transformation was not immediately visible, we made conscious efforts to build a community invested in

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bringing change to our thinking as well as the lived experiences of lives on the ground. Similarly, we committed ourselves to a praxis of learning, through museum visits, critically acclaimed films and documentaries, and deep dives into legal cases on social justice issues—not only to understand and empathise with stories of oppression, omission, and discrimination, but also to map our social action based on the valuable insights we gained. In our Intersectional Care Diaries, we included a section where we focused on our actions, however small they may be, to exhibit our praxis of love and care – one that stands resolute alongside our commitment to social justice.

The tri-pillars of praxis in our pedagogy were driven by the motivation to dismantle the hierarchy – between reason and emotion, scholarship and activism, class and world, and most importantly, between the lecturer and students – in and beyond the classroom with love and care for social justice as *Collaborative Activist-Learners*. This problematization and dismantling of the hierarchy were predicated on forging new relationships and reality. We undercut our hierarchical relationship (as teacher and pupils) to some extent in order to transform the reality of boundaries and binaries. It left us having to navigate an untrodden path in uncharted territory, which bell hooks (1994) cautioned would involve risk-taking. Such risks may include disorientation, transference of grief and trauma, and discomfort of facing our privileges, to say the least.

Nonetheless, we are committed to emancipatory politics, however minuscule it may look, with love and care, as guided by awe-inspiring figures like bell hooks (1994) or Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz (2022), those who urge us to take love and care seriously in various ways within the discipline of International Relations. We began questioning 'the normal' and embracing 'the radical'; manifesting a praxis of love at the beating heart of emancipatory politics and engaging with the care of all of us who believe in the 'radicalness' of emancipatory politics and its transformative impact.

Canvas of Love and Care

At the end of the first year of teaching (2024-25), co-learners in IR5601 came up with the beautiful idea of expressing love and care on canvas, which is depicted in the beginning of this article. Each formulation of shape and strokes of colour holds deep meaning, celebrating the moments of co-learning, connections, goodness, dilemma, and discomfort being shared and appreciated spontaneously. This article partly came out of Keshab's realisation of the missed opportunity to collectively reflect upon the mutual feeling of love, care, appreciation, and camaraderie that we developed precisely at a time when we were strangers to each other, anxious about being in the midst of people whom we knew only a few weeks before.

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Elena is a student at the University of St Andrews.

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Aniela Marks Delgado is an undergraduate student at the University of St Andrews and a co-learner in the IR4589 Intersectionality and Social Justice module. Her academic interests centre on climate justice, and the module—alongside the article-writing process—has been a valuable and enriching experience in deepening her understanding of how a duty of care is essential to shaping a just and effective global response to the climate crisis.

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