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Rima Hussein
Northumbria University

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HANDLE WITH CARE

Rima Patricia Hussein, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Business and Law, Northumbria University, UK

The late American writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde asked: where does our power lie and how do we school ourselves to use it in the service of what we believe?

On reading these student pieces, I reflected on belonging and how it is to feel out of place—perhaps in our bodies, or in learning spaces where difference is not represented. I write as a Palestinian feminist academic. We look for something to recognize—a face, a voice, an image, a tangible connection to the setting. We may look for writing that we can identify with, from voices we recognize, from those that may not often be heard or seen in a university. We search for the ‘others’ like us, and familiarity. Instead of finding them, we feel their absence: in exclusion and in the othering of our identity.

The inner world of our students is explored in this collection as we are brought into their personal life. I welcome this holistic insight and felt the importance of writing back to them, in the letter below.

Dear Student,¹

Thank you for your openness in sharing your story with us.

These stories as a collective give me hope, as your voice speaks strongly and calls out, celebrates, critiques, challenges, supports, and represents. I hear the reality for you and your individual, unique journey—both the struggle and the strength you show. I see the work and emotional labor of naming your experience and finding the words to share it with us. So much of experience can be unspoken, hidden, and not witnessed—and so I wanted to write back to acknowledge this and to bear witness.

Your writing encourages me to think about how we can care more holistically—not only about metrics and success in numbers, but about who you are, the ways that systems help or hinder you, the barriers you face to being heard, and the continuing challenges around equity.

I am inspired by your writing on the university and the way you question it, exploring why there is a lack of representation amongst staff leadership, and drawing our attention to considerations on age, sexuality, gender, disability, race, caring responsibilities, mental health, imposter syndrome, intersectionality, welcome (or lack thereof), sexual harassment, commuter challenges around belonging, being a first-generation student, and social class inequalities. Most importantly, we hear how your specific circumstances impact you, so that we can understand more personally and listen directly; this is the

¹ Though this letter needs to be addressed to you anonymously, I have read each student piece several times to find the words to reply.

depth required to turn headlines and initiatives on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) into real change.

You highlight the less visible battles that we need to know and learn more about. Since reading your work I have been thinking about the university setting, what learning truly is, and the contract we have with each other. As an EDI practitioner, I understand that the changes I can make to a system are incremental. There is much to be done. The changes required are interwoven and at varying levels. We need safe spaces in the modern university. To be heard. To be cared for. As individuals. To be represented. To belong. To be included.

Your personal reflections became a gateway to hearing embodied experiences in unprecedented times. Your sharing provides a rich tapestry of experience: navigating labyrinths, living struggles, dealing with myriad challenges—all of which bring your ‘everyday’ into sharp focus. It is insightful to hear about each of your journeys, receive your critiques, and to see these transformed into creative outputs that offer change.

During the pandemic we became more acutely aware of each other, of the impact on individuals, their families, and homes. Yet, in a neo-liberal setting such as the university, the individual and their wider life can be separated out and the person dehumanized: another degree on a conveyor belt. Our challenge is to foster a holistic approach to learning, to welcome each student, and respond to their specific needs. You have given us much to consider and respond to. Thank you for taking the time amongst the barriers you encounter to tell us loudly where our attention needs to be directed. Your story matters. I hope you feel heard and acknowledged, and know that your words count and will create ripples that lead to change.

It is powerful to share your story, reclaim space, and open your world to us.

It will be handled with care.

Reflections on Care and How we Situate it, and the Importance of Hearing Dissenting Voices

How can care be enacted in a system? Equally, how can we receive disruption or challenge to that system to create greater possibilities for the act of caring? Challenge and disruption to a system can be interpreted as an act of care when we acknowledge the emotional labor needed to share our lived experience for change. “Universities[,] as holders of many histories of learning, should be as open and accessible to as many as possible” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 22). Bringing critical voices into our awareness—to listen, to hear, to understand—is our work.

I hear through the student accounts how their voices need to be centered alongside the highlighting of silences or barriers they have encountered through their university experience. When we listen, we send a message that we welcome difference. We open the possibility of measuring success in more varied ways. Students’ learning experience is far more than their

grades. Success can be measured in their sense of being included, of developing belonging, of being in a learning community. They share with us their interpretations of success, which are both multi-layered and nuanced. Learning is a circular process: we need to be learning about how to better support individual students and their specific challenges whilst we teach the curriculum. This requires safe spaces that attend to the issues within the white, colonialist, neo-liberal, modern university. We need to be allies to students, rather than allowing systems to block humane responses to complexity and challenge, and stifle critical voices.

Dismantling how difference can be muted, blocked, and stifled by barriers, and the inequity that stems from this, is also our work. It struck me when one student wrote about not even having the luxury to complain. Complaints matter. However, as Ahmed (2021) highlights, when we cast dissenting voices as ‘complaints,’ this very act diminishes the power of the voice speaking. Instead, how about we give some space to truly hear the voice of the complainant? Dissent can be reclamation, a taking of space and a thoughtful response to an act of injustice. We can work together to attend to the complainant. That voice can be met by curiosity and a willingness to open the conversation, and in doing so we can translate the sharing into learning and change—but only if it is welcomed and heard.

It is in meeting these student voices that we can create space and a transition towards listening and responding with care. My piece has endeavored to respond to the student voices in this collection and consider the possibility of reclamation through allowing room for challenge and care in our learning spaces, rather than problematizing the ‘complaints’ or ‘complainant’ and diminishing the power of the stories shared.

As a practitioner attending to EDI, I consider the work that we do to be layered. There are four levels at which I see this work operating: responding to the individual; working with the culture of the university; steps towards accreditation around key areas such as gender barriers (through frameworks such as the Athena SWAN quality charter mark); and, institutionally, the policies that can be enacted to formalize and support adjustments for students and staff. It is all about relationships. This work starts with the individual and how we respond to them. Staff and students can work together actively to enact care within university systems and create space for an individual approach, whilst also developing policies to further consolidate activism around equity issues. I heard some of that work taking place through the accounts from the student inclusion consultants. It is all about relating to each other. Welcoming, receiving, and including voices with care is foundational to embedding equality, diversity, and inclusion in universities, helping to move beyond tokenism and tick-box initiatives to enacting consideration for the individual and their lived experience of university.

There is hope here; when you hear us together, we are louder (Ahmed, 2021, p. 26).

References

Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lorde, A. (2017). *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. London: Silver Press.