



CASE STUDY

Embedding AI in a pedagogy of compassion

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ABSTRACT

Although increasingly recognised in higher education assessment and teaching practices, compassionate pedagogy is often misunderstood. Designed to alleviate student distress and trauma, it is sometimes dismissed as ‘soft’, ‘fluffy’, or insufficiently rigorous, particularly in relation to the rapidly evolving landscape of artificial intelligence (AI) use in higher education. This case study, co-authored by academic staff and students, explores a constructive way forward. Drawing on student experiences, co-facilitation, and module performance, we demonstrate how teaching and learning with AI can be situated within a compassionate pedagogy. We suggest that this can foster engaged and inclusive learning communities promoting scholarship and belonging, while supporting critical research skills. We conclude with recommendations for educators on how they can embed teaching and learning with AI into their own pedagogy of compassion.

KEYWORDS: AI, assessment design, collaborative learning, compassionate pedagogy.

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Introduction

Stress and anxiety emerged as recurring themes in the 2022–2023 evaluation of our second-year Research Methods module, delivered across two Business and one Law undergraduate programmes at a UK Russell Group institution. The module’s learning outcomes encompass both qualitative and quantitative research skills in preparation for the undergraduate dissertation, aiming to foster independent and self-directed learning through specialist

software such as Excel, R, and NVivo. However, student anxiety, particularly around assessments, appeared to hinder overall engagement.

The challenge of fit-for-purpose assessment appears to be sector-wide, exacerbated by the penetration of generative AI into higher education since late 2022. Universities globally have grappled with questions of academic integrity, digital inequality, assessment redesign, and the rapid normalisation of AI within student practice. Scholarship in this area (e.g., Pratschke, 2024) highlights both the disruptive potential of AI and its implications for epistemic authority, student identity, and understandings of originality. JISC's sector-level guidance (Walker, 2025) notes a sustained push towards authentic assessment alongside a countertrend of increased examination use in some institutions; a response to concerns about AI-generated submissions. Within this shifting landscape, student distress often reflects both technological uncertainty and broader concerns about fairness, belonging, and academic expectations.

At the time of this case study, our module was already in its Mark II phase, having undergone a significant redesign informed by Freirean (1996) principles of critical pedagogy. When the module was first delivered, it focused on ontological positions and epistemological approaches, drawing on texts such as Bryman (2016) and Burrell and Morgan (2019). During this Mark I period, students were assessed through structured reports analysing published studies. Although results were consistently high, the assessment risked encouraging transactional behaviours and limiting deeper critical engagement.

The Mark II redesign sought to foster transformative learning (Katz, 2014), encouraging students to develop critical awareness—of their immediate surroundings and the world (Chandia & Walley, 2018; Freire, 2004). Adopting a Freirean approach, we wished for students to engage with real-life issues and challenges. As a result, we did not impose a set topic of qualitative and quantitative analysis, nor insist on a particular literature framing. Instead, we allowed them to choose the topic of their research project, which could range from specific business issues (circular economy business models, strategic drift) to areas of personal interest (impact of R'n'B culture on inner city employment). We felt that developing such critical awareness in learners would allow them to bring to light, and challenge, unspoken assumptions, dominant ideologies, and structural and social inequalities of their academic and personal journeys to date. We hoped that in time, this would inspire action for change (Freire, 1996).



However, student feedback suggested that this approach sometimes produced distress, particularly given our expectation of autonomy and self-direction. In the aftermath of the pandemic, when long-lasting trauma was widely reported (Killingback et al., 2025), we questioned whether such pedagogical disruption, even when well-intentioned, was appropriate in supporting the learner as a whole person (Tinning, 2002). We concluded that safeguarding student wellbeing required beginning not from conscientisation but from compassion. This insight led us to co-design a revised approach with our students, embedding compassion as both principle and practice.

In the remainder of this case study, we outline the principles of embedding teaching and learning with AI in our framework of compassionate pedagogy, present our approach, and conclude with a discussion and recommendations for practitioners.

Anchoring teaching and learning with AI in compassionate pedagogy

The JISC report on emerging trends in higher education assessment (Walker, 2025) highlights a marked shift towards authentic assessment, designed to equip students with the skills and abilities needed in a digital world. A key driver of this shift is the growing integration of generative AI into assessment, teaching, and learning. The report stresses not only the importance of safeguarding academic standards and assuring quality, but also of promoting student wellbeing through assessment and learning that is ‘compassionate and sensitive to learners’ (Walker, 2025, p. 2). In parallel, the report identifies student–staff partnerships and session co-design as essential for creating meaningful learning that ensures engagement while also future-proofing learning.

Compassionate pedagogy offers a useful framework through which these outcomes can be pursued. Rooted in the Latin *pati* (to suffer) and *com* (with), compassion requires educators to go beyond sympathy or commiseration and to take active steps to alleviate distress. Lane et al. (2023) position compassion as central to pedagogic practice, and Killingback et al. (2025) describe a four-stage process: (1) noticing suffering; (2) developing a desire to alleviate it; (3) extending this into a readiness to act; and (4) taking concrete steps to reduce distress. This action-oriented approach brings compassionate pedagogy into close conversation with Freire’s (1996) notion of praxis, understood as the unity of reflection and action (Manolchev et al., 2022). At the same time, like feminist pedagogies (Shrewsbury, 1997), compassionate



pedagogy recognises inequality and oppression as shaping student experience, while keeping the learner's personal struggles at the centre and seeking to extend individual being into 'being-with', through community membership and connection.

Killingback et al.'s (2025) scoping review identifies three interconnected but distinct levels of practice for compassionate pedagogy. At the programme or institutional level, it requires a commitment to recognise student struggles, which may stem from their social standing, financial pressures, or personal circumstances, and to design opportunities for connection and wellbeing. This reflects the understanding that robust and authentic learning can be both transformative and unsettling (Dickson & Summerville, 2018). At the module level, compassion enables educators to notice suffering more directly, to address privilege and power inequalities (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020), and to develop relationships of support and guidance. Finally, at the level of the individual lecturer, compassionate pedagogy is enacted through everyday practices of kindness, recognition, and relationality that safeguard learner dignity.

Research on communities of practice and communities of learning reinforces these insights. Cherrington et al. (2024) highlight how trust and connectivity enable learning to be supported through social relationships, particularly when sustained over time and when shared values and meanings can emerge. This process both underscores and extolls the importance of learning as a relational process, through which students are allowed to 'be-with' others. Working with real-time issues and challenges—both in the sense of planetary mega-crises and in the context of their own learning—can be a frustrating experience (Armitage, 2013). This frustration is a necessary part of knowledge acquisition and can facilitate the development of personal values and positionality towards global challenges. Yet students need not weather this discomfort alone. Creating meaningful connections and collaborations can promote not only psychological safety, but also a sense of respect for perspectives and viewpoints divergent from their own (Manolchev & Nolan, 2026).

However, within the constraints of an 11-week module, the time required for deep relational development is limited. This raises two questions: 1) can we embed compassion meaningfully within communities of learning given the temporal and structural confines of a single term? 2) Can compassionate pedagogies be introduced at an individual and module level, without the need for institutional transition towards them?



In our module, we turned to the ‘pupil teacher’ model (Servant–Miklos, 2024) used in 19th-century Britain to deliver efficient instruction in the ‘three Rs’ (reading, writing, arithmetic). Professors often co-opted older students as co-deliverers for groups of younger learners. Adapting this principle to our contemporary context, we sought to embed co-design and co-facilitation within the Research Methods module, recognising gaps in student familiarity with statistical methods and drawing on more experienced peers to support their classmates. It was these principles—noticing distress, fostering relationships, and co-creating learning communities—that shaped our turn to compassionate pedagogy in practice. In the following section, we outline how these approaches informed the design and delivery of our case study module.

Methodological approach

This case study adopts a reflective methodological stance aligned with pedagogical action research (Niemi, 2019). Consequently, our purpose was to place the spotlight on our own practice and open a space for discussion, rather than construct an empirically-validated framework of how compassion should be practised in higher education teaching and learning. We sought to triangulate our experiences of module delivery with student evaluation data and discussions with student co-facilitators. However, this was carried out to inform and improve our teaching practice in real time and not to produce generalisable claims.

Case study

The Research Methods module sits at the centre of two Business and one Law undergraduate programmes in a UK Business School. It provides second-year students with their first sustained exposure to both quantitative and qualitative research and the use of specialist software, including Excel, R, and NVivo. Assessments are split into two halves: a quantitative task and a qualitative task, both of which permit AI support in a ‘responsible and transparent’ manner. ‘Responsible and transparent use of AI’ is defined as: (a) using AI for low-stakes clarification; (b) documenting AI interactions; and (c) critically evaluating AI outputs rather than replicating them. We also discuss with students the embedded AI features of analytical tools such as NVivo, emphasising the continued need for human judgement in thematic analysis. Students are thus encouraged to use generative AI to check their work, refine sentence structure, or explore simple queries, but not to use AI to generate full assessments.



Even within this framed permission, many students experienced the module as highly challenging—their respective degrees do not have statistical prerequisites, and they were learning statistical techniques for the first time, adjusting to new digital tools, and negotiating their relationship with AI.

The 2025 module delivery discussed here was demanding on the academic team, also, as numbers doubled from the usual 60–65 to 113 students. Students were divided into two groups who attended weekly two-hour workshops, combining lecture-style delivery with applied exercises. Initially staffed by three lecturers (two delivering quantitative content and one focusing on qualitative methods), the module team quickly noticed widening disparities in student confidence, especially in statistical work. By week three, it was evident that some students were struggling with both the unfamiliar content and the autonomy expected of them. Responding to this distress, we extended the teaching team to include five student co-facilitators, drawing inspiration from the ‘pupil teacher’ model (Servant-Miklos, 2024).

Operationalising the ‘pupil teacher’ model

Five co-facilitators were selected from students who expressed confidence in statistical or qualitative methods. The process was both open and iterative—students did not have to follow a formal application process but could step forward and volunteer in each session. Volunteers were selected on a rolling basis, which meant that there was no pressure to volunteer multiple times, nor was the opportunity to be a volunteer closed after a single round. AI literacy was beneficial, but not a prerequisite. Volunteers assisted with leading small-group exercises, troubleshooting during coding or analysis tasks, modelling transparent AI use, and facilitating discussions about evaluating AI outputs. Co-facilitators rotated among groups during sessions, supporting distributed learning and answering peer questions.

This compassionate intervention created new ‘communities of compassionate learning’, in which students could support one another alongside academic staff. We describe the process of working together in detail below.

Quantitative delivery

The quantitative strand began with demonstrations of statistical tests in Excel, which students replicated on their own devices. Small-group seminars enabled students to experiment with AI, for instance, by refining R prompts or exploring guidance on data visualisation. The



assessment used publicly available Netflix data, which minimised collusion and supported authentic problem-solving. Students who advanced quickly often assumed informal leadership roles, later formalised through co-facilitation. Students valued real-time support, and we found that simply providing a space to ask questions and work with others reassured students who had previously expressed anxiety about working with data. The nature of the work, namely using code, and comparing different statistical tests based on the data meant that students could collaborate without the overt risk of collusion. This appeared to result in positive assessment outcomes and on average, marks for the quantitative assessment were in the high 2:1 range.

Qualitative delivery

The qualitative strand centred on a literature review linked to the Netflix dataset, extended by thematic analysis of IMDb user reviews. Group activities encouraged students to use databases such as Business Source Complete and to experiment with AI tools for literature searches in parallel, developing transferable prompt engineering skills extending beyond the scope of the module. This exercise revealed important critical insights, such as the limited attention AI outputs gave to sustainability as a negative impact. It also highlighted surprising limitations even when using AI. Students realised that, to maintain critical awareness of their chosen literature, they required working knowledge of the topics they were investigating. AI could provide an overview and a summary as a starting point, but this did not offer a suitable substitute for understanding, which came from a more prolonged engagement, for example through reviewing the literature on their topic. This meant that the time saved by using AI at the outset had to then be reinvested in following up the sources it drew on and checking the accuracy of its interpretation. This was perhaps why grades were on average lower here, and mostly in the low-to-mid 2:1 range. Co-facilitation was also more fluid here, with different students stepping in to lead in the same session, embodying the relational and flexible ethos of compassionate pedagogy.

Discussion

The starting point for this case study was the moment we, as an academic team, gained collective appreciation for compassionate practice. Approaching our Research Methods module from a Freirean (1996) critical pedagogy perspective and seeking to equip our



students to navigate the AI terrain of higher education and beyond, we had become increasingly aware of the challenges of transformative education. We wished to develop 'critical awareness' (Freire, 1996) in learners and, through this, harness their individual positionality towards a range of environmental, social, and economic issues. However, we came to realise that such an awareness of global issues had a psychological and emotional impact on our students.

Our exploration of compassionate pedagogy offers the promise of alleviating some of the resultant discomfort and distress. Rather than replacing the critical pedagogical principle of praxis, or, the combination of reflection and action (Freire, 1996), compassionate pedagogies extended it. Compassion does not prevent reflection and action but focuses this action into learning contexts as sites of shared human experience. It opens opportunities to create sites of (psychological) safety and trust—not merely as a desirable end in itself but also as a prerequisite for meaningful and fulfilling learning. Learning, situated in social bonds, communities of practice/learning (Cherrington et al., 2024), and anchored in the complex realities of the present (Manolchev & Nolan, 2026).

At the outset of our exploration of compassionate pedagogy, we encountered two common critiques: that it is too 'soft' (patronising, insufficiently rigorous) and too 'fluffy' (inhibiting resilience). Our experience of teaching and learning with AI through a compassionate pedagogy model offers some empirical counterpoints to these concerns. We accept that our approach was 'soft', but only in the sense of being human-centred and used in 'soft' HRM or soft systems approaches (Checkland & Poulter, 2020). Far from reducing rigour, it enabled students to assume leadership and responsibility for their peers' learning, enhancing their own skills while inspiring others. Equally, we found the approach to be decidedly 'non-fluffy': despite students working with diverse datasets, the overall quality and criticality of submitted assessments remained consistently high (average marks in the 2:1 range). This suggests that compassion did not dilute standards but enabled students to focus more meaningfully on critiquing reality, rather than transactionally satisficing assessment requirements.

Our initial implementation of compassionate pedagogy principles raised two further questions. First, we wondered if compassion could be embedded within communities of learning during the short time span of a single term (the module's delivery model). Cherrington et al. (2024) discuss the need for extended interaction in order for communities



of learning to adopt new values, such as compassion. Our students were willing to volunteer their help to others—as well as withdraw it—spontaneously and without expecting anything in return. We do not know if future cohorts are likely to behave in a similar way, and we acknowledge that longitudinal research is required to determine students' attitudes towards compassion over time. Second, we questioned whether compassionate pedagogies could be introduced within a single module, without overarching institutional changes, which is recommended in Killingback et al.'s (2025) multi-level framework. Once again, we were reassured. Our students did not challenge our efforts to use a pedagogic approach which foregrounded their wellbeing, nor did they regard our approach as lacking rigour. However, the impact of compassion on student learning must be studied systemically, accounting not only for multi-level institutional structures but also for a range of individual circumstances—personal, financial, health and wellbeing, and so on.

Finally, our approach has an impact on how students used AI, minimising reliance on AI 'shortcuts' (Pratschke, 2024). Having critically observed the limitations of AI outputs, some students worked together to pool knowledge, develop shared understanding, and form informal reading groups. This nurtured accountability and responsibility for their own up-skilling, maintaining scholarly integrity and disclosing AI use, and treating AI as another tool in their critical thinking toolbox, rather than a substitute to learning. We feel these considerations are particularly important in the fluid and evolving context of AI governance in higher education.

Recommendations

Our case study demonstrates that compassionate pedagogy can be enacted in practical and scalable ways within AI-supported teaching. In this section, we offer three recommendations for educators and learning developers seeking to adapt these insights to their own contexts. Each responds directly to critiques that compassion is 'soft' or 'fluffy' and shows how, when enacted deliberately, it can strengthen rather than dilute academic rigour.

First, adopt a holistic approach to learning and assessment. Compassionate pedagogy requires attending not only to cognitive outcomes but also to the emotional and psychological conditions that make those outcomes possible. Students' difficulties with statistical methods, for example, were not simply technical but reflected wider anxiety about autonomy,



unfamiliar tools, and the perceived high stakes of assessment. By recognising this distress early and adjusting our pedagogy accordingly, we created conditions in which confidence could grow and deeper engagement became possible. Psychological safety should therefore be treated as a foundation for rigorous learning—not as a reduction of challenge but as its necessary scaffold. Practical measures might include early low-stakes activities, staged assessment opportunities, and explicit guidance on wellbeing and workload expectations. Although our case study suggests there are benefits in adopting compassionate pedagogies across individual modules, best practice recommends a multi-lateral approach (Killingback et al., 2025) which requires co-ordination across modules and institutional support.

Second, foreground relationality (Manolchev & Nolan, 2026) and community-building in order to redistribute expertise; build belonging and mutual accountability. The introduction of student co-facilitators enabled peers to support one another both within timetabled sessions and informally across the module. This relational dimension mitigated isolation, reduced reliance on AI shortcuts, and encouraged students to take responsibility for their own and others' learning. Educators can embed relational practice through structured peer review, co-designed assessment criteria, collaborative group tasks, or formalised peer-led workshops. These practices create communities of learning that sustain engagement even in demanding content areas. It is important to also maintain communication with student co-creators even after the initial co-design task is complete to ensure continuous (even if informal) feedback.

Finally, position AI as a means, not an end. Students in our module learnt to interrogate AI critically by observing both its possibilities (e.g., generating R prompts, supporting literature searches) and its limitations (e.g., the omission of sustainability themes). When framed within compassionate pedagogy, AI became a stimulus for inquiry rather than a shortcut to bypass learning. We recommend that educators continue to work to make AI's role explicit through clear AI use statements, transparent expectations, and scope for using reflection in assessment. Situating AI within wider disciplinary and human relationships helps ensure that knowledge creation remains collaborative, critical, and grounded in judgement. Importantly, educators working with AI should be mindful of latest developments in the field and be prepared to adjust their approach in line with calls for hope and caution (Lindebaum & Fleming, 2024).



Taken together, these recommendations highlight that compassionate pedagogy does not stand in opposition to rigour. By attending to holistic wellbeing, embedding relationality, and positioning AI as one tool among many, educators can cultivate communities that are compassionate and inclusive. In doing so, we can uphold standards, safeguard student dignity, and support the development of the critical skills and resilience required to navigate the evolving impact of AI on the higher education landscape.

Conclusion

This case study has illustrated how compassionate pedagogy can be enacted within an AI-supported Research Methods module. By shifting our focus from pursuing transformational learning to the alleviation of distress, we reframe assessment as a site of compassion and relational practice. Through this, we seek to not only equip students with technical skills in statistical and qualitative analysis, but also to create conditions in which they feel recognised, supported, and safe to take intellectual risks. In doing so, we demonstrate that compassion does not stand in opposition to rigour. On the contrary, it enables students to assume leadership roles, develop their positionality towards global issues, and engage critically with AI as one tool among many.

We have argued that compassionate pedagogy offers a framework for addressing two pressing concerns in higher education: the wellbeing of students navigating the uncertainties of AI, and the demand for authentic, future-facing assessment. By embedding compassion as both principle and practice, educators can foster belonging, uphold standards, and prepare students for the complexity of a post-digital world.

We conclude with a reminder to ourselves and fellow educators: changing the world is not enough; it is also necessary to recognise and alleviate distress within it.

Disclosure statement

The authors used the following generative AI tool in the preparation of this manuscript: Claude Sonnet 4.6. The tasks performed by Claude Sonnet 4.6 were limited to spelling checks and to review the manuscripts reference formatting against the Journal's requirements.



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