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**“EMPATHIC INTELLIGENCE:**

**THE PHENOMENON OF INTERSUBJECTIVE ENGAGEMENT”**

### **Biographic Note**

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## **Abstract**

### **Empathic Intelligence: the phenomenon of intersubjective engagement.**

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The phenomenon of learning defies easy explanation, but when people attune to each other, something significant can happen in the space between them. ‘Empathic Intelligence’ attempts to articulate aspects of the intersubjective and intra-subjective phenomena of pedagogy. Inter-subjective phenomena occur when individuals’ thoughts and feelings are mutually influenced. Intra-subjective phenomena occur when an individual’s thoughts and feelings are mutually influencing. It is a theoretical concept underpinned by an argument that effective pedagogy happens when an educator is able to create a dynamic between thinking and feeling, in a context which is perceived as caring. Empathically intelligent educators demonstrate a number of qualities, attributes, predispositions and abilities, in particular those which contribute to enthusiasm, capacity to engage others, expertise and empathy. At its best, empathically intelligent pedagogy can be transformative. It can mobilise tacit abilities, create affirming emotional templates for learning and support the development of higher-order cognitive abilities.

This paper will outline some of the theoretical antecedents and principles informing empathic intelligence, including recent brain-mind research. The nature of empathy, enthusiasm, expertise and capacity to engage, along with the function of intelligent caring and respect for individual dignity, will be elaborated. Reference will be made to

the function of imagination, narrative, reflective thinking writing in empathically intelligent pedagogy. Empathic intelligence articulates some aspects of the practice of educators committed to understanding the qualitative and sometimes ineffable aspects of their professional work.

One of the encouraging recent developments in pedagogy is the recognition that effective teaching and learning does not occur in an emotional or intellectual vacuum. Rather, it occurs best in contexts where individuals with personal histories and value systems, current agendas, skills, abilities and a need to develop those skills and abilities further, engage in a mutually beneficial enterprise to further students' understanding and capacity to function in an increasingly complex, global world.

That significant shift in focus from pedagogy as a simple enterprise of matching outcomes to content and methods to pedagogy as a phenomenon of intersubjective engagement is reflected in the reform agendas in Australian states such as Queensland and Tasmania to develop curricula around new ways of learning. learning. The *Essential Learnings Framework* in Tasmania is built around thematic concepts such as 'Communicating', 'Thinking' World Futures', 'Personal Futures', 'Social Responsibility'. Such themes emphasise the fundamentally interpersonal and trans-personal nature of pedagogy. Participation and engagement are essential prerequisites of curricula developed by teachers in collaboration with their peers, with students and with their communities of learners.

The focus of this paper is on an aspect of inter-subjective engagement, ‘empathic intelligence’ which, it is argued, articulates aspects of the inter-subjective and intra-subjective phenomena of pedagogy. Empathic intelligence is a theoretical concept (Arnold, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1998) underpinned by an argument that effective pedagogy happens when an educator is able to create a dynamic, or energy, between thinking and feeling, in a context which is perceived as intelligently caring. Empathically intelligent educators demonstrate a number of qualities, attributes, predispositions and abilities, in particular those which contribute to enthusiasm, capacity to engage others, expertise and empathy. Such educators are also sensitive to the function of attunement as a signal of attention and mirroring as affirmation and a means of modulating response.

Empathic intelligence is a scholarly propositional concept which sets out parameters for research upon either aspects of it, or its totality. The concept of empathic intelligence is an outcome of liberal, democratic, student-centred educational philosophy, influenced by the pioneering work of John Dewey, (1916,1963,1964, 1971). The decades of the 1960s and 70s saw the development of student-centred, holistic pedagogy which encouraged teachers to engage students in learning through experience (Polanyi,1959, 1969,1974,1983, Bruner,1972, Vygotsky,1988). Once it was accepted that students could learn through exploration and direct experience, teachers were no longer expected to simply transmit information and check the accuracy of students’ memories. It was recognised that teachers’ true worth lies in their ability to be well informed, engaging, flexible facilitators of meaningful

learning experiences, as well as in their sensitivity in managing interpersonal relationships in the classroom.

The development of the theory of empathic intelligence has been influenced by scholars, researchers and practitioners in cross-disciplinary fields of human interaction. The concept of rational thought, associated particularly with the work of the eighteenth century philosopher Rene Descartes (1637), is being re-conceptualised since brain neural imaging and research on the development of consciousness have illustrated the interconnectedness of thought and emotion in the brain (Damasio 1994, 2000, 2003), LeDoux, (1992) Williams (2001) Carpenter (2002), Davia (2002)). This research provides insight into the phenomena of neural connections between the cognitive and emotional parts of the human brain. It is argued here that educators and those engaged in client or person-centred work need to be encouraged to respect what many of them know intuitively already: that motivations and feelings are significant factors in making sense of experience. It is not just *what* is learned, but how experience is shaped by feelings and reflective thought which determines the nature of learning. The inter-subjective and intra-subjective processes involved in shaping experience are dynamic and often subliminal.

The work of Daniel Stern (1985) on the role of empathy in infancy illuminates the importance of empathic attunement in early learning, emotional development and socialisation. Stern writes about the development of 'inter-subjective relatedness', that ability to experience one's self as a separate being from others, but as a dependent being too. The process by which the mother's

empathic responsiveness evokes, stimulates, validates and maybe names the infant's emotional and physical state, ensures that her underlying affective response is encoded in the baby's brain.

According to Stern, and others, the degree to which the major affect states (interest, joy, surprise, anger, distress, fear, contempt, disgust and shame) are encoded in the baby's brain influences the development of their core relatedness. That sense of core relatedness is the basis for the development of inter-subjective relatedness. Stern argues that in the pre-verbal stage infants seek to share joint attention, intentions and affect states with significant others. The process of organising the affect responses of the mother to the infant, and indeed, possibly, the infant's own physiological responses also, Stern refers to as the laying down of templates into Representations of Interactions that have been Generalised (RIGS) (Stern 1985:97). It is the mother's (and others') empathic responsiveness to the infant which influences the integrations of 'agency, coherence, and affectivity' to provide the infant with a unified sense of a core self and a core other: 'the existential bedrock of interpersonal relations' (p.125).

### **Empathy and Brain-based Research**

There are challenges in undertaking scholarship in a field like empathy, which traverses several established disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, neurophysiology, education and the arts. The work of Antonio Damasio (1994,2000,2003) provides scientific evidence which can influence an

understanding of inter-subjective and intra-subjective experiences. He argues that human consciousness is actually consciousness of the feeling and experiencing of self. His case studies make compelling reading and offer deep reassurance to those who believe in the complementarity in intellectual development of emotion and cognition. As he demonstrates, emotion and feeling “provide the bridge between rational and non-rational processes, between cortical and subcortical structures” (Damasio, 1994, p.128).

Based on the evidence of his research with brain-damaged patients, Damasio(1994) argues:

*My investigation of neurological patients in whom brain lesions impaired the experience of feelings has led me to think that feelings are not as intangible as they have been presumed to be (xvi)...Contrary to traditional scientific opinion, feelings are just as cognitive as other percepts (xvii)...Feelings form the base for what humans have described for millennia as the human soul or spirit (xviii).*

### **Intelligent Caring**

It is argued here that part of understanding the phenomenon of intersubjective engagement is to recognise that learning is best achieved in a climate of care and mutual respect. Such care is offered, not imposed, and respects humans’ need for autonomy, self-determination, and challenge, as well as their need for security and safety in making mistakes. In this model, learning is a dynamic,

democratic process engaging both the past and the present, the felt and the known, the tacit and the visible, kinetic and potential energy. An understanding of this process and the ability to put it into effect generally mark an empathically intelligent person. Such a person harnesses complex intellectual, affective and interpersonal skills primarily for the benefit of students and others for whom they are responsible, and secondarily for the creative self-affirmation which can occur in the service of meeting others' needs.

Care involves more than a feeling or attitude of warmth towards a person or an experience. Intelligent caring embodies within it attention, engagement and an assessment of the consequences of care. The intelligent carer is mindful of the context in which the need for care arises, and mindful of the need to offer support which mobilises the other's coping strategies in preference to developing co-dependancy. For example, engrossment in another's issues can swamp one's critical faculties and run counter to intelligent caring. Nonetheless, a capacity to engage with experience in an attuned, mindful way is necessary to 'data-gather' and learn from experience. Without attention, engagement and the application of intelligent caring inter-subjective experiences are perfunctory. Intelligent caring can harness the psychic energy emanating from inter-subjectivewarmth, attention and engagement to modulate decision-making in functional ways. It positions inter-subjective and intra-subjective engagement as the foundation for transformative pedagogy because it involves a considered modulation of both thought and feeling.

Self-understanding is a precursor to empathic intelligence. In this model, care is modulated by intelligence and imagination which can anticipate consequences while recognising the limitations of anticipation. Such intelligent caring can consider options within a context of multiple responsibilities. Intelligent caring models self-reliance and mutuality.

Arguably, applied empathic intelligence and imagination not only liberates, it also humanises. The American educational philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1995,1997) argues that three capacities, above all, are essential for the cultivation of humanity in today's world:

*First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions-for living what, following Socrates, we may call "the examined life"...(Second) Citizens who cultivate their humanity need...an ability to see themselves not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern... The third ability of the citizen, closely related to the other two, can be called the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have (pp.9-11).*

The cultivation of humanity, according to Nussbaum (1997,p.14), means 'learning how to be a human being capable of love and imagination'. Further, she argues that when a child and a parent learn to tell stories together, sharing a sense of wonder,

*the child is acquiring essential moral capacities...stories interact with (children's) own attempts to explain the world and their own actions in it. A child deprived of stories is deprived, as well, of certain ways of viewing other people. For the insides of people, like the insides of stars, are not open to view. (1997, p.89)... The habits of wonder promoted by storytelling thus define the other person as spacious and deep, with qualitative differences from oneself and hidden places worthy of respect (1997, p.90).*

### **Definition of Empathic Intelligence**

Empathic intelligence is a complex concept which attempts to articulate those aspects of intersubjective ( dynamics between subjects) and intrasubjective (dynamics experienced within subjects) engagements which influence learning. It acknowledges the fluidity of human engagements in its focus on dynamics but proposes that enthusiasm, expertise, capacity to engage others and, of course, a capacity to act empathically are foregrounded behaviours and attitudes exemplified by those who are empathically intelligent professionals. Embedded in expertise are the capacity to mirror others, to attune to them and to be self-reflective. While empathic intelligence attempts to capture something of the resonance of human engagements, it acknowledges the necessity for participants themselves to observe, feel, intuit, think, introspect, imagine and test their own data gathering of phenomenological moments, mindful that in adopting a stance of engaged and subjective- objectivity, that attitude itself will influence the phenomena of engagement. That is, the nature of an engagement is influenced by all the dynamics in play. Phenomenological moments arise

without pre-warning but often as the result of careful attunement, preparation and sensitivity to dynamics. They are moments of high emotional impact which result in a significant shift in thinking and awareness. They can be pleasant or unpleasant (surprising, exciting, exhilaration) (shocking, distressing), but their lasting impact upon thinking and feeling depends very much on how well they are understood and integrated by individuals.

- Empathic intelligence is a sustained system of psychic, cognitive, affective, social and ethical functioning derived from:
  - An ability to differentiate self-states from others' states ("who owns what")
  - An ability to engage in reflective and analogic processing to understand and mobilise a dynamic between thinking and feeling in self and others (self narrative)
  - An ability to be enthusiastic, engaging, actively empathic, intelligently caring and professionally expert
  - A commitment to the well-being and development of self and others

It requires mental agility to be empathically intelligent; not unlike the mental agility needed to tell stories and to engage with them. Logic alone will not explain the most complex phenomena of life or the concept of empathic intelligence; rationality and emotion have to cooperate in that endeavour.

This paper, with its focus on the phenomenon of intersubjective engagement through 'empathic intelligence', argues for promoting both cognitive and

affective ways of interpreting experience since each contributes shape and quality to the process of making sense of the world and relating effectively and affectively to others. What is literal, quantifiable, scientific and linear is valuable in its place. Alongside these there exist equally important mental strategies which are metaphoric, variously shaped and potentially quantifiable. What we now realise is that the boundaries between these broad distinctions are actually blurred. For explanatory purposes, empathic intelligence is grounded here in a context of personal narratives or histories because they play a formative role in the development of personal, interpersonal and professional life. The nature of professional practice is patterned for each individual practitioner by the phenomenon of lived, professional experience. Like stories, reflective practitioners blend theory and idiosyncratic experience into meaningful structures to stabilise the flow of phenomena.

### **The Nature of Empathy**

It is argued here that:

*Empathy is an ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of self and others. It is a sophisticated ability involving attunement, decentring and introspection: an act of thoughtful, heartfelt imagination*

In this definition, empathy is a process of observing the phenomena of intersubjective and intrasubjective engagements to collect data to inform decision making or interventions in phenomenological moments.

In order to achieve the necessary objectivity, self-understanding and complex cognitive and affective functioning are required. While even small children can demonstrate sympathetic attunement to the feelings of others, empathic intelligence, as it is discussed here, is a well structured, mature, patterned and consistent way of functioning cognitively, socially, ethically and emotionally. While it seeks to understand rather than judge, it is imbued with the morality of caring.

In pedagogy, leadership and client-centred professional work, empathy is more effective when it functions together with a capacity to engage others, with enthusiasm for pedagogy, for the discipline and for students' learning through inter-subjective experiences, and when the educator demonstrates expertise.

### **Historical antecedents to defining empathy**

Apart from a reference in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to 'empathia', as Susan Verducci (2000a) points out empathy first appears in nineteenth-century German aesthetics in the work of Friedrich Vischer (1807-1887) (quoted in Verducci 2000a); Robert Vischer(1847-1933) (quoted in Verducci 2000a), and following them, Martin Buber and Theodore Lipps. Friedrich Vischer called empathy a process of 'symbolic interjection of emotions into objective forms', such as engaged in by viewers of works of art. Robert Vischer described empathy as projecting one's own life into the lifeless form: " Only ostensibly do I keep my own identity...I am mysteriously transformed into this Other." (Friedrich Vischer 1994, 19-20). The philosopher Martin Buber (1965, p.97)

describes the experience of feeling strong connectedness with subjects or objects:

*...to glide with one's own feeling into the dynamic structure of an object, a pillar or a crystal or the branch of a tree, or even of an animal or a man, and as it were to trace it from within, understanding the formation and motoriality of the object with the perceptions of one's own muscles; it means to 'transpose' oneself over there and in there. This it means the exclusion of one's own concreteness, the extinguishing of the actual situation of life, the absorption in pure aestheticism of the reality in which one participates.*

Lipps (1851-1914) went further than the Vischers and Buber, saying: "empathy is the fact here established, that the object is myself and by the very same token this self of mine is the object...the antithesis between myself and the object disappears, or rather does not yet exist" (reprinted in Mallgrave and Ikonomou, see Verducci, p. 68). He saw the phenomenon of empathy as projective, imaginative and primarily affective.

Verducci (2000a, p.67) notes that in these early ideas of empathy, "the seed of this process lies in the imagination, the flower in the viewer's affective life. The imagined mental representation of an object and the viewer's feelings become inseparable."

In these rudimentary views of empathy, concentration and a capacity for absorption are significant factors. What is not mentioned is a capacity for

cognitive distancing or awareness of a self engaging in the experience. The experience as described by these philosophers is aesthetically pleasing and self absorbing. Affect predominates over cognition though self awareness is present, alongside self absorption. As Verducci notes (2000a, p.69), “empathy as sole grounding for the aesthetic experience cannot account for the phenomenon of aesthetic judgment.”

While there is a body of research on the nature of empathy (Kohut 1982, Barnett 1987, Barnes & Thagard 1997, Eisenberg & Strayer 1996, Feshbach 1987, Verducci 2000), its function in pedagogy is little researched (Feshbach,1984)

### **The Differences between Empathy and Sympathy**

People commonly think sympathy and empathy are the same thing. Empathy, although it shares some characteristics with sympathy, is a very much more sophisticated and complex concept than sympathy. The latter is an ability to feel something akin to what you might imagine another person is feeling, usually when you witness some distress in them. You might feel sorry for their plight and spontaneously express your sorrow in a comforting way. Such expressions of sympathy acknowledge a human kinship which may be soothing to the person in distress. Certainly, expressions of sympathy at appropriate times are an important ritual in our lives and in our social communities. To this extent the person expressing sympathy may well be also in an empathic mode but sympathy suggests we can share common experiences with others, empathy

encourages us to decentre, to see things from another's point of view, to experience layers of thought and feeling, beyond what might be immediately accessible.

Empathy seeks to understand human behaviour, not to judge it. In achieving that outcome, it also reveals itself as the heart of moral imagination. The metaphor of the heart here suggests both the traditional emotional connotation, and the functional notion of the heart as a pump, sending life-sustaining blood around the body. Empathy as the heart of moral imagination encourages consideration of the consequences of actions.

A contemporary researcher and scholar in the field of empathy research, Susan Verducci, comments that an "unusually diverse group of American educational thinkers are calling for cultivating empathy in schools for the purpose of moral education" (2000a, p.63). She cites the work of educators Thomas Lickons and William Bennett and Maxine Greene, care theorist Nel Noddings, moral philosophers John Deigh, Deborah Meier and Martha Nussbaum, noting that despite their different ideologies, they "understand empathy as connected to morality" (p.63). Verducci further notes that "When educational discourse focuses on cultivating empathy for moral education, theorists are referring to very different phenomena" ( p. 64). She cites the work of Lorraine Code (1994) who suggests empathy is an epistemological experience, Deigh (1995) who requires that the empathiser consciously recognise the other as a separate entity, and Reed (1984) who argues that empathy has been delineated as either active or passive, rational or mystical, artistic or scientific and a symbol of

projection or reception. The definition I favour as an educator is a convergent one which requires an empathically intelligent person to see what separates oneself from another, as well as what bonds a self to another; what is artistic and what is scientific about the empathic position; what is potentially moral and what is potentially manipulative, what is generative and vitalising and what is debilitating about such a position.

Essentially, this educator's position focuses on empathy as a dynamic process which involves movement and energy flow between apparently disparate models of psychic functioning. While I can appreciate that Verducci might see disparate views on empathy endangering "arguments over cultivating empathy in schools" (2000a, p.64 ), many educators throughout the world function from an empathic position and are affirmed in their approach by the positive outcomes which their students experience. Those positive outcomes can include a greater sense of autonomy as learners, increased enthusiasm for learning, resilience in the face of difficulties and greater sensitivity to the interplay between thought and feeling.

Verducci's own work clarifies some of the confusion. Her view (2000a, p. 66) that there is an interrelation and interdependence of both cognition and affect present in empathies that are tightly connected to morality is close to the view expressed in this paper. Here it is argued that there is an energy or dynamic connecting affect and cognition with each influencing the other. While an empathically intelligent person has to have some measure of concern for self and others to mobilise the feelings, imagination and thought necessary for such

functioning, empathic intelligence has a moral basis but not necessarily a guaranteed moral outcome. For example, while an empathically intelligent educator may function with moral concern and model empathically intelligent readings of literature or art or science, the students may not necessarily adopt the educator's moral/ ethical position. Indeed, to be truly empathic, the educator would not impose such a condition. Furthermore, educators have complex responsibilities to their students, including, distinctively, a responsibility to teach a body of knowledge, along with developing students' skills, and attitudes of mind. When empathic intelligence is applied to teaching and learning, it has to include expertise, a capacity to engage, and enthusiasm.

### **Imagination and empathy**

Empathy in education has its genesis in child-centred pedagogy and was promoted through the self-psychology movement emanating from the work of Heinz Kohut (1959, 1971, 1979, 1982), an American self-psychologist and analyst. While student-centred pedagogy has encouraged educators to respect and promote imaginative responses to learning, the concept of empathy in education incorporates imaginative approaches but exceeds them. One could be an imaginative teacher without necessarily being empathic, but it would be difficult to be empathic without having imaginative capacities. Imagination is a necessary but not sufficient characteristic of empathy. In current student-centred pedagogy, educators encourage students to engage in cognitive experiences such as visualisation, hypothesising, re-conceptualising, speculating, lateral thinking, creativity and problem solving. Such strategies

are now orthodoxy in pedagogy designed to develop students' thinking abilities. Empathic approaches to education are designed to encourage a dynamic between thinking and feeling in order to promote learning more effectively.

In common parlance, 'empathy' means being able to imagine, often intuitively and instinctively, how the other feels. Kohut (1959) described empathy as 'vicarious introspection'. As a more complex process than 'identification', this definition includes both affective attunement and the cognitive capacity to judge how best to respond empathically to another's emotional and cognitive state.

It is important to note as we explore this concept of empathy that it is not sufficient to imagine that we can know how another is thinking or feeling based solely on awareness of how we think or feel ourselves. If we reflect on the notion of 'vicarious' in Kohut's definition, we can appreciate the feeling of embodiment the word suggests. That is, a vicarious experience feels as if we are sharing something with another, even when reality would tell us we are not sharing that moment. For all the limits of vicarious experience, it is still an important capacity in developing imagination and, ultimately, empathy. When we move to the 'introspection' part of Kohut's definition, the concept of empathy gains more balance. Introspection here refers to the capacity to reflect deeply on one's experiences in the service of gaining guidance to action. To introspect is to work through the mass of stored, embodied, often unconscious memories, to seek significance from them. It calls on analytic skills as well as

emotional awareness. It allows one to determine the differences between one's role as a spectator, albeit one who is vicariously attuned to witnessed events, and the nature of the role played by active participants. Another way of thinking about introspection is to regard it as the process which functions to give perspective to experiences: to distinguish between their personal and public importance, their temporal and their lasting significance. Introspection can secure the links between affect and cognition by promoting awareness of their symbiotic or interdependent nature.

Kohut's definition of empathy is relevant to pedagogy where internalisation of learning is required, as distinct from rote learning or mechanistic drilling of information. For example, if a student downloads factual information about the First World War from the Internet, it is a relatively straightforward task to read through the material to determine a sequence of events. If, however, the aim is to draw out the significance of that War to international events of the twentieth century, a deeper kind of thinking, analysing and feeling about the War and its consequences, is required. Introspection and evaluative capacities come into prominence in engaging in quests to determine the significance of events, be they private or public. The psychic energy needed to sustain that kind of introspection is the dynamism fundamental to pedagogy which could be characterised as educative leadership. That is, educators who engage deeply with the dynamics of their professional life and who are drawn to both intense engagements and a wish to understand those engagements can create enthusiasm in others, while also demonstrating complex levels of expertise.

Dynamism as it is theorised in empathically intelligent pedagogy refers to the sense of energy, tension or movement present when we internalise or relate with deep thought and feeling to a situation. Empathic attunement underpins that process. This dynamism is recursive. It is a psychic energy which moves outwards, and inwards propelled by the human capacity to learn from experience. Interpersonal relationships, work and play involve dynamic experiences, alongside the personal dynamics of our own mental and physical states. It is inherent in life that things change constantly. Reflective people monitor their own internal dynamics closely. For them, it is second nature to observe, reflect and analyse their own thoughts and feelings, and their interactions with others and the environment. Such people tend to develop a rich inner life - the product of that recursive, dynamic process of inter-subjective and intra-subjective engagements.

Dynamism functions to fuel deep learning, insight and psychic development. Even within the concept of dynamism as outlined here, there is a role for stillness, and for attuned listening, to self, and to others. Dynamism in the case of poise or stillness might be thought of metaphorically as potential, rather than actual energy.

As knowledge and understanding expands, words and concepts develop to reflect change. Sometimes such words and concepts work to promote change. In that sense, empathic intelligence could be thought of as the meeting place of science and poetry. In such a meeting place, empathic intelligence can seem paradoxical at first. It can be both confronting and liberating. The confronting

part may requires reflection on deeply held beliefs about education and interpersonal and professional life. The liberating part is the affirmation this concept may give to ideas that professionals know intuitively, even though the reasons are not yet clearly articulated or understood.

Empathic intelligence is grounded in practice and intrinsically mobilised by speculation and imagination, It can be, therefore, both a defining and an enabling theory when practised by deeply reflective professionals. The complexities of inter-subjective and intra-subjective engagement affirm belief in the power of relationships to mobilise tacit abilities for deep learning. Such engagement draws on charity, or intelligent caring, as a principled strategy and hope as an enabling affect in transformative learning.