Valedictory lecture: Connecting with Care: Pedagogies for transformation

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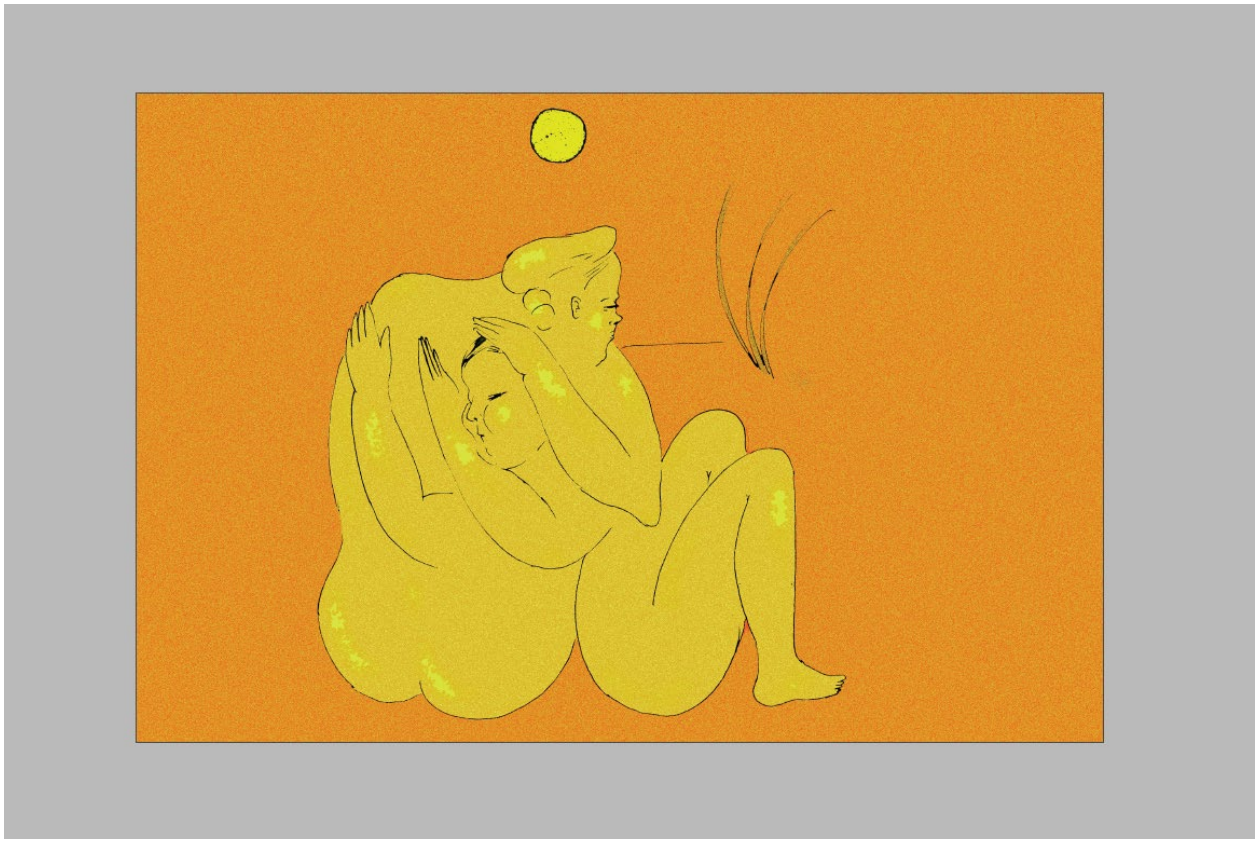

I first entered the classroom as a teacher when I was in my early 50s. I had given public talks and the odd guest lecture, but I had not been charged with the responsibility of running a Masters course. In my first course, *The Making of Development 2101*, I was inspired by my experience of working with postdevelopment scholars to present development from the outset as a highly contested process, one that had to be criticized, challenged and resisted. I was determinedly honest about the conflicts, contradictions and cracks in development theory and practice.

The first year of the course was complex. I ended up having to defend the course, not only with my colleagues in the corridors and in meetings, but also in a published exchange in the *Third World Quarterly* following a highly critical article by an ISS PhD student (see my response - Harcourt 2017).

Some students literally told me the course had turned their world upside down. But others appreciated what I was trying to do. In the anonymous feedback from the students in 2015, one student wrote:

I want to thank you for the risks you take… You take a risk because of your teaching method. You take a risk when you let everybody express their own opinion, not knowing who is on the other side. You take a big risk with every single class you teach…. Given your status, you could easily rest and take no risks at all. You could teach in an 'ordinary' way. It wouldn't be the same for you, I am sure, but you could do it and nobody would demand you to change it. So, thank you for being 'extraordinary'. Please, keep taking risks. Now

more than ever. You can't imagine how students treasure the professors willing to take the kind of risks you take. (quoted in Harcourt 2025: 22)

So, I kept taking risks; to disrupt dominant narratives and open spaces for debate as a pedagogical practice. To paraphrase Paolo Freire, I see education as the practice of freedom to deal critically and creatively with reality and to learn how to participate in the transformation of our world. Taking risks means you care for students' futures, even if, at times, such risk taking is not always immediately appreciated by students, nor may I add, by colleagues.

What I will share in the talk

In my valedictory lecture I will share with you some of the risks I have taken at ISS as a mentor and teacher of MA and PhD students. I will reflect on my experience of working as an intersectional feminist in the university environment looking at teaching practices based on intersectionality, radical vulnerability, differential belonging and the ethics of care.

I reflect on conversations around my latest book the *Conundrums of care: feminist entanglements in critical development studies* (Harcourt 2025), published Open Access by Bloomsbury Academic. Please do pick up your postcard designed by Emma Claire Sardoni with a QR code of the book during the reception. It is the first in the book series I am editing called *New writing in critical development studies*, which, I am pleased to announce, has already 6 books in the pipeline, 4 of which Bloomsbury funded to make them Open Access.

Teaching as a process of careful disruptions

As I said earlier, I entered the academe not as a trained teacher but as a feminist and a research activist, who was more used to speaking as an advocate than to giving lectures. I envisaged teaching as a way to provide hope and inspiration for collective transformation. I understood teaching as a process of careful disruptions.

I was inspired by what bell hooks calls 'engaged pedagogy' (hooks, 1994) – a connection that emerges in the classroom but travels across a lifetime. Teaching with care meant teaching from your politics, and your heart. The risk was to teach by acknowledging vulnerability, pain and anger and to show my deep concerns about ecological, social and economic injustice.

In the course, I would give a lecture on body politics with the aim to disrupt normative sexual politics. In an international classroom, this was a risk as I made visible often tabooed issues around gender, sexual identity, age, ability and race. I presented body politics as the struggles of people to claim control over their felt and lived biological, social and cultural embodied experiences. I would take care to show examples from around the world, quietly nervous about how students from those countries might respond. I adjusted the lecture every year to consider responses from previous iterations. One striking image I would show, was that of a young woman who took off her headscarf in Tehran to protest mandatory Hijab in 2017. I recall that one year at the end of the lecture, an Iranian woman came up to me. I had noticed her in the front row, eyes widening when she saw the photo. I was concerned she might be upset, but instead she thanked me for drawing attention to the courage of Iranian feminists, a legacy, which, as we know, despite all odds, continues today.

The boundaries between activism and academe are messy, especially in the classroom where what counts as knowledge and what is considered teachable is always contested. There is an element of vulnerability to sharing your passions and concerns in any space,

but particularly when you are the convenor of that space as a teacher and 'expert' and especially as the big questions surrounding gender, race, economic, ecological and social injustice do not have easy answers.

When I gave lectures on gender, I was conscious of how much the students knew, and how much I learnt from them even if I was the one at the front of the classroom. I was deeply aware of generational difference. The gender issues that many students experience even if they are only following them on social media are mediated by gender backlash, cultural sexism, authoritarianism, sexual violence, racism and transphobia. Queer politics was far more advanced from my generation's focus on largely heteronormative concerns around conception, contraception, abortion and infertility. In classes on gender there was usually a productive discomfort. Once I was asked about queer politics in the Middle East – and feeling unable to answer appropriately such a question, I played the classic teacher trick of asking 'do others have an opinion'? I was wowed by a student from Jordan, whose comprehensive and informed answer based on her years of experience at an NGO working on sexual and reproductive rights, gave important insights into queer struggles in the region.

Radical vulnerability

That moment, when I asked the students for their opinion, was one of radical vulnerability. It illustrates how disrupting hierarchies means embracing radical vulnerability as a mode to learn together. Radical vulnerability is 'a way to feel, connect, and relate; a way to find trust, hope, and meaning; a way to dream, dismantle, and co-create in the big and small moments' (Nagar 2023, 267).

I learnt to adopt radical vulnerability to open up the big questions around development in an international classroom. I had to acknowledge that the centering on European

knowledge was just one way to understand development processes, and that the focus on a dominant narrative of European modernity and progress had been at the cost of many other cultures and societies. It meant being unafraid to encourage students to reflect on their own lives 'moving, engaging, reflecting' on the plurality of knowledge. It meant leaving 'one's comfortable psychological, political, and discursive place' (Sundberg 2014, 70). It meant working with different educational expectations of students brought up in hierarchical education systems. This required me to not only challenge their sense of how knowledge is gained, but also to be accountable to students' diverse life-worlds. While I would refer to my Australian/European/transnational experience of development, I made it clear that it was not the only truth. I would begin the course with a clip of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies' 2009 Ted Talk on 'The danger of a single story' to show: the power of the dominant narrative of development as inevitable progress; the importance of questioning it; and to hold out the promise that the course would tell some of the different stories of development.

The video of Adichie inspired students to consider a pluriversal approach to development and how it related to their own experiences. In the last few years, I have taught a smaller course on Global Political Ecology where I was free to be more experimental in teaching the different stories of environmental justice. In this class we explored topics such as living environmentalism, relational ontologies and speculative fiction, alongside the big issues of ecological economics, planetary boundaries, extractivism and climate crisis. It was exciting to experience how PhD and MA students used their creative imagination as well as their deep reading of new writings and their political experience in environmental movements to explore pluriversal approaches to global political ecology. In one session of the course PhD students took MA students on a tour of Scheveningen Bos to look at multispecies relations.

Another year, PhD students led the class in speculative story making about sustainable futures, which led to wildly imaginative utopian and dystopian stories.

The politics of belonging

Reflecting on teaching as a practice formed by relational and accountable connections means understanding our own positionality. By this I do not mean identity politics, though there is a lot of that in university settings where students feel free to explore sexual identity. Rather I refer to Aimee Carillo Rowe's concept of 'differential belonging' which helps us to understand the politics of teaching as a form of connection and building relations of trust. To quote Carillo Rowe:

The sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are (becoming). The meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of … My work aims to render transparent the political conditions and effects of our belonging, where we place our bodies, and with whom we build our affective ties. I call this placing a 'politics of relation' (Carillo Rowe 2005: 16).

My positionality as a white older woman with dual Global North citizenship teaching students mostly from the Global South required me to be aware of location and body/knowledge/status positioning. I had to unlearn my sense of belonging to whiteness as entitlement. I was made acutely aware of the dangers of centring whiteness in calling attention to it as an assertion of my legitimacy. Throughout my time at ISS, students have politely, and sometimes not so politely, named and questioned my privilege. Over the years I have become aware of how age, race, gender and class converge in an embodied way through my role as an older white female teacher, who is in authority, but who wishes to speak from a place of vulnerability, connection and care.

When I first came to The Hague, I deliberately chose to live in a place within walking distance of ISS. This was partly because I had to commute back and forth from Rome where my husband and, at first, my two daughters lived, and it was partly because I wanted to invite colleagues and students home. I hosted feminist reading groups, writing groups and dinners for students to meet visiting academic guests, as well as potluck dinners where colleagues and MA and PhD facilitators would come to reflect on the courses we were co-teaching. I have since heard from students and younger colleagues how it had been the first and, for some, the only time they were invited to a professor's home. And I was warned by some colleagues about being careful to set professional boundaries. They pointed out how there was a risk to being so open, caring and available. I was recently told by a colleague, I was just too caring, implying I was not tough enough.

I am in the process of writing, with four feminist academic friends, an article that reflects on care in the university. We position care as a politics of refusing historical, gendered and racialised hierarchies by making time to build trust and communities of learning in and outside the classroom. In our article we consider the different ways we have worked within and outside the university, paying attention to the embodied, situated and specific sites of our belonging. I consider the spaces I created in my home as slow, joyful ways to build a politics of relation that extends beyond the classroom.

Critical Hope

Such an approach questions power and privileges that circulate in the classroom. Farhana Sultana describes this form of teaching as one of 'critical hope' where 'meaningful dialogue and empathic responses in the classroom foster possibilities of social justice, for environmental justice, for equitable relations, and more hope-full futures' (Sultana 2022: np.). Sultana sees the academy as a place of political action which can undercut 'a sense of despair and inaction when a problem is overwhelming in order to have impacts beyond the

academy and into the future' (Sultana 2022: np). Teaching can encourage 'powerful acts of solidarity and radical care that can inspire, reimagine, and co-create change' (Sultana 2022: np.).

I have often co-taught and have invited people such as Giovanna Di Chiro (2006), who today delivered the laudatio, from my feminist network to join me. One memorable occasion was when I invited Australian geographer, Katherine Gibson, together with Indian artist, Sheba Chhachhi, to share with 150 MA students alternatives to economics using art (Harcourt 2019). Katherine presented examples of diverse economies created by artists working with practitioners and academics. Sheba showed one of her film installations. The students in groups then drew versions of alternative futures in collages and zines.

What does it mean to care when teaching?

In my book *Conundrums of Care,* on which this lecture is partially based, I explore care as actions, connections and relations. Care is work, an emotion, a disposition, a declaration of love, a politics for social and ecological justice through solidarity and collective action and hopes for conviviality. As Joan Tronto states, we need courage to forge an alternative future in 'which care truly matters' (Tronto 2017: 39). I hope I have shown today that care in teaching is far from being soft and fuzzy but is about taking risks, about being attentive to power relations, and in this sense, being political. As I show in my book, for feminists the conundrum of care is that care is both expected to be done by women, as part of the oppressive traditional structures which feminists fight against, while simultaneously care embodies the meaningful, joyful relations and connections for which we yearn. We want to find ways to build trust, solidarity, and reciprocity in relationships, while at the same time we struggle against the structural power inequalities underpinning care (Tronto 2013). The politics of care means 'dealing with unavoidable tensions and conflicts' (Ojeda et. al. 2022: 12).

Looking back at my teaching, I see the tensions. For example, when I began teaching it was uncomfortable to talk about menstruation in the classroom. There were silences and people would ask 'what has this to do with development'? But over time, this discomfort dissipated. Some years into the course, I would refer to successful civil society campaigns in Nepal and India to end the notion of women's bodies being impure when menstruating. One year, an Indian woman student spoke of her experiences in the *Pink Chaddi Campaign* and *Paint it Red*. And another year, two men from Ghana and Nigeria, sitting at the back, who had never spoken in class, shared how back home menstruation was now no longer seen as shameful or debilitating. In conversations like these you realise how development operates in everyday experiences as relational and context dependent.

I learnt from students about what gender or body politics or political ecology means for them. For me it is about connection, or what Deborah Bird Rose describes as being 'seriously alive'. (Bird Rose 2024: 49). It is in forging complex relationships across difference, carefully disrupting norms and expectations, so that our systems of life can flourish.

The debates in the classroom can be rewarding, but for me, what is even more important is how critical ideas about development travel outside the classroom. ISS values our engagement in societally relevant processes. Our research and teaching is about re-envisioning and learning from grounded experiences and lived realities of communities globally. But paying careful attention to those realities does not mean there are easy pathways to transformation. Our knowledge of relations and connection is necessarily partial and shifts continually. I came to ISS to reflect and learn after years of transnational advocacy in development processes. Sometimes I have felt heartbroken when I recall what I had envisaged as possible in the late 1980s when the international community spoke of the peace dividend, and social and environmental justice seemed just around the corner. I

was in the rooms with heads of UN and government leaders when people were talking of new economic orders in which development would no longer be needed. Decades later those promises seem so naïve. We live in a world of increasing turmoil, the rise of the far right, anti-gender, anti-'immigrant' politics reeling from impact of wars, genocides, climate crisis and Trumpian shocks. It feels as if we need new kinds of knowledge and new kinds of conversations to resist and to bear witness from a plurality places.

But, as Rebecca Solnit (2024) stated, it is possible to be heartbroken and hopeful. Solnit invites us to 'lay up our supplies of love, care, trust community and resolve' (2024: np). She also points to the need for stillness and quiet times to recharge, and to find community to build strength through relationships with people we trust.

In my politics of care in the classroom, I have aimed to create a community of learning where students learn to listen with care to each other's reflections on the topic we are discussing. I have aimed to unsettle the idea of university learning as expert abstract knowing and to recognise how knowledge is embodied and experienced individually and collectively. Students create together a sense of collective knowing which interweaves with the texts/videos/lectures they have read or watched or heard.

Inspirations for co-learning

I have been inspired by many great teachers. For example, in my global political ecology classes we read Robin Wall-Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweet Grass* (2013). An insightful book I was first introduced to by one of my students and have shared with many people since. Wall-Kimmerer is both an indigenous and a scientific scholar who writes on plant ecology, traditional knowledge and restoration ecology. Her book shows how western science can be in symbiosis with traditional ecological knowledge so that we do not separate empirical, rational observation from emotional and spiritual knowledge values. Wall-Kimmerer describes this as a 'two eye seeing' model, i.e., sustainability requires indigenous science as

well as western science. I have invited students to reflect on this by sharing their reciprocal relationships with Earthothers: the animals, plants, gardens, oceans, rivers, in their lives, and how they feel they are taking responsibility for their relations with them. Their sharing has led to beautiful stories which reflect on the way they care for other-than-humans. Their stories range from campaigns against E-waste, to care for house plants, to food cooperatives, cherishing worms in gardens, and anecdotes about chickens and saving banana trees. Their encounters with Earthothers opens them up to considering how to move away from human exceptionalism as they shape together a co-learning process.

This sharing of reflections means we look together at ways to counter powerful economic and political interests around which ecologies are contested and negotiated. We seek to learn from indigenous knowledge and practices as important epistemological, cultural, and ecological questions. We speak about the frictions around what is knowledge, what is possible to learn, what is extractive. Some people have called this a nomadic curriculum (Garcia-Arias et al 2026) in which the classroom is a place where care is a pedagogical practice that is both performative and political.

I have learnt a lot from classroom debates where we shared different stories, passions and anger. What is wonderful is that the conversations continue beyond the classroom, over years, through emails, social media and personal encounters. I see in these processes how it is possible to build practices of responsibility and reciprocity and care. These connections, sharings and learnings are the joyful, if intangible, and impossible to measure, ways of taking the risk to be an intersectional feminist teacher.

You can hear more on the risks and joys of such teaching processes in the recorded conversations leading up to my valedictory with a few of my mentors and friends, who could not attend today. Katherine Gibson, Arturo Escobar, Aram Ziai, Ingrid Nelson, Kelly

Dombroski and Yvonne Underhill-Sem discuss my book, Conundrums of Care, the art of teaching, and also what Arturo calls the 'Revolution of Care'. Please make sure to view the excerpts from these conversations, edited by Sarah Njoroge, the ISS Multimedia Communications Officer, during the reception that follows this valedictory. As you can see my neighbour Nina Van den Bosch is drawing her impressions of this valedictory event and you can also view the completed drawings at the reception.

Thankful acknowledgements

To conclude, thank you to everyone who joined me today, in-person and on-line.

Thank you to my students, my colleagues and my allies for all their support over these years. I cannot name everyone, but all of you have a place in my heart. I would like to thank those of my family who are here and those who are in Australia. At my Inaugural lecture I was so happy that my father, resplendent in the crimson robes of a Cambridge D.Litt was here. Sadly, he is no longer with us. I miss him every day. I was delighted my mother was planning to come all the way from Sydney, Australia to be here. But she had to cancel her ticket due to the war in the Middle East. We will miss her, particularly as she does love a good party. Finally, a very big thank you to my husband Claudio, and my daughters Caterina and Emma Claire who have shown such care for me over these last 14+ years, when my work at ISS meant we had to be a family always on the move.

Conundrums of Care: Feminist entanglements in critical development studies is available on Open Access.

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