

## Enacting criticality and care

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### Abstract

This article provides an account of one higher education teacher's views on the notions of criticality and critique within the context of continuous professional learning spaces for academics and in which the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is central. I present an account of enacting SoTL practices through criticality and (with) care. Included is an account of SoTL engagements with academics, a process that takes time, courage, patience, and hope. The argument that I make is that withholding critical care – which includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness – is part of injustice. Hence, contestation, criticality, and critique with care must remain key SoTL activities. A twin argument is that (self) criticality is a precursor to critiquing others. The article concludes with implications of enacting criticality with care, in SoTL and beyond.

**Keywords:** care, criticality, higher education, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), social justice

### Introduction

As a higher education teacher and CriSTaL associate editor, troubling criticality and offering constructive critique are key activities that I engage in daily. Enacting care, whilst being critical, becomes central in this work. However, the nature and form that criticality takes is multifaceted and complex, that is, there is no one way to be or act. Being situated in a Learning and Teaching Centre and working across disciplines, I acknowledge my own struggles with bridging gaps, divides and blind spots and perpetually seeking common ground, respect, recognition and trust. I agree with Fenwick and Edwards (2014: 35) that it is not about the superiority of what they call 'knowledge accounts' but instead how those accounts 'become more visible or valued', how they are socialised and enacted in practice. I would add that those knowledge accounts need to be handled with criticality and care.

The rationale for writing this article is two-fold. First, to add to the discourse around criticality grounded in respect and connected to care, particularly timely in a world characterised by increasing socially unjust practices (recently exacerbated during the Covid 19 pandemic).



Coupled with this is the distrust and disrespect towards students (one only has to follow the recent ChatGPT vs academic integrity/plagiarism debates), the current South African electricity crisis (proposed solutions that further deepen the injustices for the underprivileged), outdated curricula in urgent need of renewal (made visible by student protests such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall), inclusion of indigenous knowledge and/or minority group perspectives (like #BlackLivesMatter), and many other global complexities. Given this context, my hope is that this article can contribute to the discourse on and enactment of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in critical and caring ways. Second, the motivation behind writing this article is to inspire CriSTaL readers and possible authors to engage with, shape and share their scholarly work with considered, critical care.

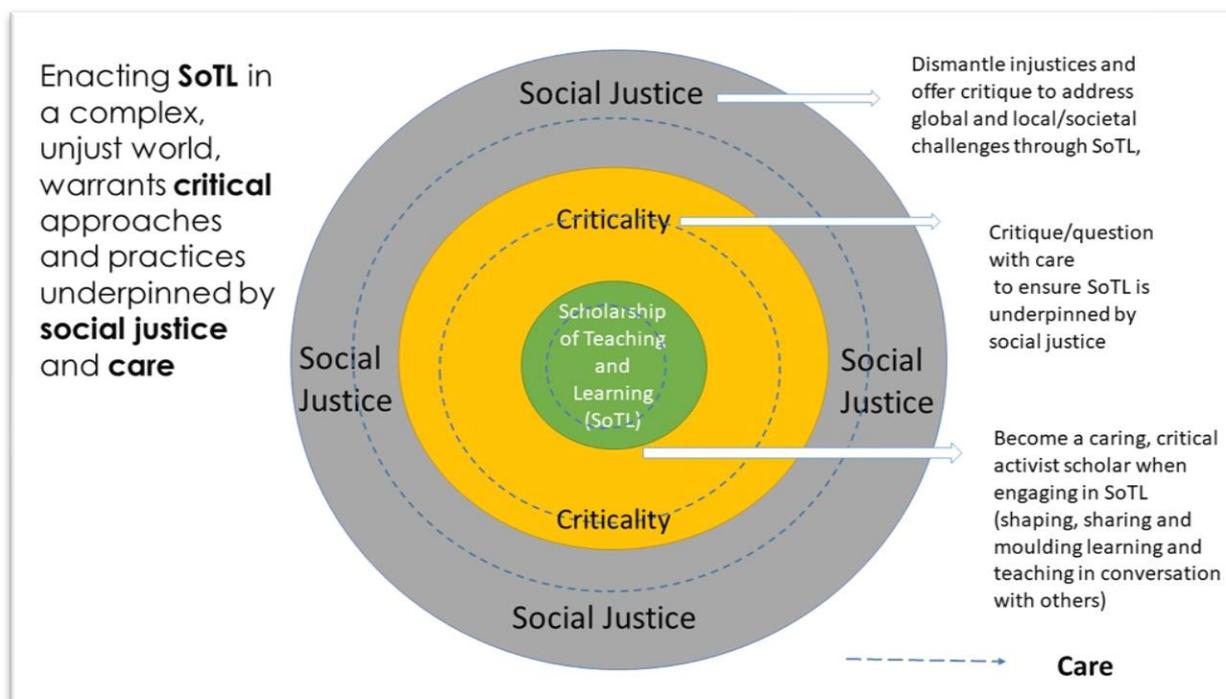
I start by sharing my understanding of criticality social justice and SoTL, highlighting its intersections. Next, I provide a story on how I enact criticality in my SoTL. This is followed by my thinking around implications for criticality and care, ending with some propositions.

### **Conceptual Clarity: At the intersection of Criticality, Social Justice and SoTL**

The notion of criticality – as part of CriSTaL's aims and scope - is linked to troubling, reconfiguring, and re-imagining higher education through dismantling hegemony and valuing intersectionality positionalities, varied histories, and inequalities. By implication, using critical theory as framework does not automatically equate to criticality. In fact, Latour (2004: 232) posits that 'critique has not been critical enough'. Rather, adopting or enacting criticality involves transformation, the type that Lange (2014) proposes that is contextual and changeable rooted in critical thoughts and complexity. It further entails critical thinking and also (critical) hope and care (see Czerniewicz, et al., 2020), not necessarily negativity and/or fault finding.

In an editorial piece, Harrison and Lockett (2015) draw on a number of theorists to outline the notion criticality and/or being critical as including hegemony explorations, multiple voice inclusion, questioning roles and authority, and becoming discerning about knowledge and/or anti-expert claims. They cite Latour (2004: 261) to caution that critical epistemology has led to the distrust of 'good matters of fact' and that '[t]he question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism, but on the contrary, renewing empiricism' (2004: 231).

My conception of criticality is more closely linked to Freire's (1970) idea of understanding the world and questioning the inequities within it. Thus, criticality requires a commitment to speaking out against injustice, critiquing (questioning) ourselves and others, valuing difference and essentially making the requisite cultural shifts for all to thrive. The concept of criticality further denotes appraising SoTL practices in such a way that goes beyond individual philosophies/positionalities/designs to ones that invite what Zembylas (2018: 629) calls 'social justice-oriented action and activism'. Enacting SoTL warrants critical approaches and practices underpinned by social justice and care if we are to engage in the complexity of this unjust world. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the intersection of SoTL, Social Justice, and Criticality (with care).



**Figure 1.** SoTL underpinned by social justice, criticality and care

SoTL is the 'systematic study of teaching and learning and the public sharing and review[ing] of such work' (McKinney 2006: 39). SoTL activities include critically engaged scholarship that is simultaneously collaborative, reflexive, and interdisciplinary (Leibowitz, 2010). Other SoTL activities include institutional reform, curriculum renewal, and educational leadership practices (Hubball, et al., 2013), as well as systemic and identity work (Raffoul, et al., 2021). Like Leibowitz (2010), I approach SoTL as a values-based, critically engaged scholarship, underscored by collaborative, reflexive, and interdisciplinary practices. Given the socio-political nature of SoTL, an approach that values criticality (with care) is warranted.

Historically, SoTL has been struggling to take hold as a legitimate field of study (Agherdien, et al., forthcoming). While Felton (2013) acknowledges SoTL as a field, he critiques its focus on methodological issues and being classroom focused rather than theoretically situated. In my view, SoTL is both pragmatic, as well as theoretically sound, provided that a critical exploration of learning and teaching is accompanied by active sharing, a deepened (collective) understanding and a shift from scholarly approaches to scholarship. Harrington, et al. (2021) propose that shaping the educational culture and showing evidence that SoTL is valued are key to entrenching SoTL work. Making SoTL-student success linkages explicit – without resorting to narrow cause-effect arguments but instead moving to critical, empirical approaches and practices – is another way to firmly entrench its enactment. Criticality can also extend to developing critical thinking skills/literacies and criticality in students.

From the perspective of developing criticality in students, the practice often entails infusing: i) critical digital pedagogies (CDP), ii) developing critical thinking (CT: process of negotiation and thinking (Cottrell, 2005), and iii) exercising critical reflection (including self-criticality) in a logical

way. Critical Digital Pedagogy being more about activism (a way of being and a concern with how we treat others) by necessity has to be multi-voiced, must shift minds and actively break down institutional and societal barriers (Stommel, et al., 2020). Thus, criticality is simultaneously about being/thinking and doing/enacting, with an emphasis on difference rather than sameness, divergent rather than convergent thinking. It is about shifts in identity (who I am) as postulated by Wenger (1998) and cultural work (how I do things) (Aghardien, 2022). I argue that critiquing with care (beyond fault-finding) happens when criticality is offered in a socially just way. Hence, I view the tripartite alliance –SoTL (scholarship), criticality (with care), and social justice – as one that can advance the academic project.

Being socially just involves universal principles of justice and fairness and an ethical and moral obligation to challenge, critique, and question continued injustices (Aghardien, et al., 2022). Specifically, associated economic, cultural and political dimensions (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012) cannot be left out of the equation. Thus, to be socially just in one's scholarship, one has to be critical of (un)spoken rules and hierarchical structures, question the learning environments that students inhabit, and critique and dismantle the cultures that inhibit rather than embrace individuality and also difference (DeTurk 2011). If not done with care, then we stand to miss the purpose of higher education.

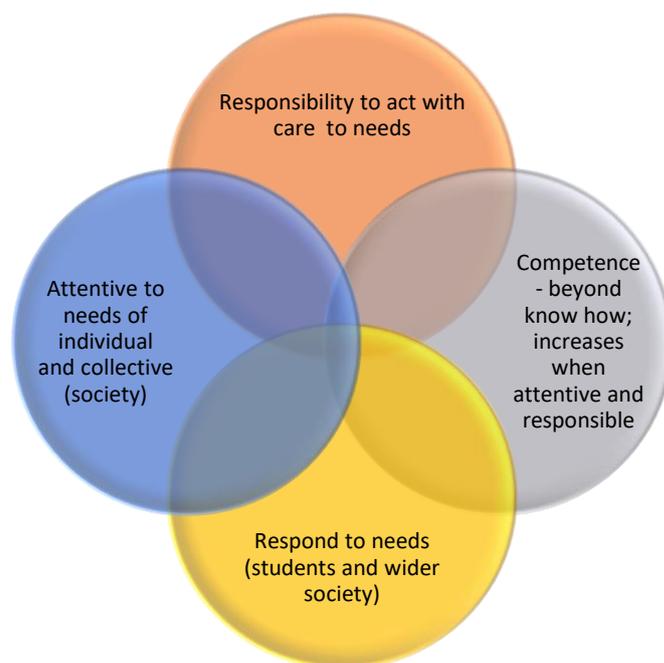
Those of us in academia have no choice but to have a critical approach to SoTL and hence to spaces where students are expected to 'leave everything they have been taught, believed and valued behind, to uncritically accept a foreign, western, culture which exists at many South African universities' (Pillay & Aghardien, 2018: 351). We have to challenge this insistence on sameness and move towards what Bozalek, et al. (2021: 27) calls 'responsive caring' so that we shift towards 'justice-to-come'. In my view, advocating for social justice on behalf of and in support of students is a moral obligation that all in academia have. According to Goodman (cited in DeTurk, 2011), the privileged collectives engaging in social justice work often do so out of an ethics of care and justice perspective and progressive self-interest firmly connected to their identity. It is this identity work that I turn to next and insert my story to explicate how critique and care intersect.

### **My story: What has care got to do with it?**

Offering critique, in my view, demands being self-critical. I propose that self-critique is a precursor to critiquing others. This entails questioning my own worldview, assumptions, values and beliefs as regards to SoTL work or what Cooper (cited in Harrison & Lockett, 2015) call critical literacy skills. To enable such criticality, I ask myself central questions such as: Whose interest does this serve? Why am I including x and excluding y? What does my reaction to x say about my own fears, insecurities and beliefs? How can I be of better service to those around me? These difficult, self-critical questions require (self) care. In a recent book chapter, I present a view of care as being 'integrated across religion, time, contextual factors and practices... It encompasses moderation (no place for extremism), gentleness, compassion, calmness and kindness to all' (Aghardien, 2022: 33).

Care further extends to being attentive to student and societal needs and having the social

responsibility to respond competently, (Tronto, 2005) in socially just ways. Thus, I position the withholding of care – here specifically referring to Tronto's (2005) care elements attentiveness, competence, responsibility, and responsiveness – as part of injustice. Critiquing without care is tantamount to destruction, not construction and stifles creativity and experimentation (or more specifically, doing academia and SoTL differently). No wonder higher education has thus far not been able to transform sufficiently. This lack of transformation is irresponsible.



**Figure 2** Elements of Care (Tronto, 1993, 2005)

The intellectual generosity of attentiveness and responsiveness to who others are that Tronto (1993, 2005) advocates, does not mean withholding constructive critique. In essence, one has the responsibility to offer honest feedback and insights and pose questions at key moments. Living in this space can be extremely uncomfortable and contentious, yet necessary both in being scholarly and in one's scholarship. As Nash (2019: 33) posits, being a 'vocal critic' (actively voicing) goes beyond 'intellectual critique' (remaining at thinking/theorising). The voicing/thinking nexus requires criticality and care. Schaeffer and Tamminga (2023) reminds us that care cannot be learned any other way than by being caring. These authors contend that competence can be increased through increased attentiveness and through taking responsibility. While there is no one recipe to follow, Tronto's four elements of care could still provide a good starting point to move towards criticality with care.

Establishing the professional learning needs of staff and being responsive – Tronto's care element (1993, 2005) – to those needs is an act of care and shows a certain degree of respect. Nevertheless, sometimes the individual need is simply to gather information on SoTL and not the co-construction of SoTL knowledge (at times the collective need). Being responsive becomes

much more nuanced and requires criticality, thinking, voicing and acting. A serious dilemma for me is that I want colleagues (students) to see the value of SoTL and possibilities for its implementation, not simply learn about SoTL. Put differently, what is valued is not only technical competence (both lecturer and student), but knowledgeable SoTL thinkers and practitioners who can apply the knowledge towards attaining student success. To this end, I have to provide learning opportunities that take them beyond a set of competencies (know about and know how), show the love of and for the discipline, model the passion I feel for doing the work, and be pragmatic about what is possible or not. It is not about simply meeting the need(s). The subject content knowledge, pedagogical practices and methodologies alone are never enough. Responding to the need with passion and care entails sharing the love for/of the discipline and the person, the knowledge and the know-how. Care involves being hospitable, inviting others to share and extend the conversations. Adding the critical exchange of ideas to the mix creates possibilities for changing processes, products, and possibly, beings.

Doing academia and/or SoTL differently by necessity includes challenging ourselves to think differently, as well as questioning and critiquing prevailing views. I find that when social justice ideals such as challenging the powers that be is done with kindness and care, it will seem less like an attack and more like a generative action. Admittedly though, critique/challenge is not necessarily invited or welcomed. In my postgraduate teaching, I honour students as the future of academia. In exercising criticality with care, and with social justice at its core, hierarchical relationships are flattened and co-creation is valued. The results are usually quite affirming and humbling.

I have to acknowledge that this care work is not always seen as being generative. Co-constructing curricula requires pedagogical approaches that are open, honest, reflective, and reflexive. More importantly though, practicing through care (for the inner and outer being i.e. the whole human being) – is part of the learning and teaching craft. I identify with Shulman's account of SoTL which states that:

Our work as teachers should meet the highest scholarly standards of groundedness, of openness, of clarity and complexity. But it is only when we step back and reflect systematically on the teaching we have done, in a form that can be publicly reviewed and built upon by our peers, that we have moved from scholarly teaching to the scholarship of teaching. (2004: 166)

Building on each other's work as Shulman (2004) suggests is important but requires time for reflection and resources such as funding for sharing at conferences and on other platforms. To that end, the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDP) SoTL Project at Wits helps somewhat but we could do more in enhancing competence in thinking/voicing critique, in socially just ways.

Like Nash (2019: vii), SoTL work has afforded me opportunities to question and to 'be in conversation' with others whose work interests me and whose scholarship has shaped my

thinking. It goes beyond competence (capability and know-how), to embodying, enacting, living the sought change and practicing with care. I believe that my position of power and privilege in the Institution (as Curriculum and Teaching Unit Head) leaves me no choice but to speak up for the marginalised students and staff in whose service I am. This positionality holds true, perhaps even more so, for my minority group identity (as a black, Muslim, female academic), where I am simultaneously an outsider looking in, acting as social justice activist, challenge hegemonies on behalf of others and not for them, but I do so also for myself as an insider. As self-serving as this might appear, I cannot help others if I cannot help myself. That is, if I am afraid of exercising my own agency, then I have very little hope of what DeTurk (2011) calls being an ally<sup>1</sup> to others and/or having an ally identity.

So, for example, when students and/or colleagues ask me to be a critical reader of their draft papers/articles/learning material/projects, I will purposefully look for strengths as well as aspects that can be strengthened. I make a point of offering honest, frank feedback that 'isn't about improving manuscripts; it's about improving [empowering, my emphasis] the scholars themselves' (Poole, in Chick, 2022). While this is the express purpose, it is not always received this way. When I sense some apprehension, my gut reaction is normally to reflect on how I have phrased my feedback and critical appraisal and how I might have imposed my own lens onto a different context that I may not (yet) fully understand. What I remind myself to do then is to think of care as being core to being human and humane (Appoifis, 2022). In offering learning opportunities (also known as Academic Development) to staff, I often contend with issues of work overload, trauma as a result of the pandemic, frustration and despair, i.e. the challenges and complexity of the HE environment. I am myself located within this same environment. With this in mind, when staff push back against institutional imperatives such as for example encouraging engagement in SoTL, instead of a binary approach (you are either with us or against us) I make a conscious effort to understand their points of departure, reflect together on what brought them there and commit to how we could navigate the requisite shifts together. What I want to highlight here is that Tronto's (1993) care element attentiveness to context matters - so too does individuality within the collective. Responding to the contextual realities requires care. Yet, care requires effort and time that oftentimes results in exhaustion and frustration. Care is thus not unproblematic.

To conclude my story, criticality and care are complementary and not on opposite ends. Reflection on my scholarship affirm and humble, ground and disrupt, perplex and enlighten. So, to answer the question posited at the start of this section - What has care got to do with it? - I argue that care has everything to do with criticality. I am (mostly) comfortable in this ever-evolving, fluid space that is called academia but recognise the need to move beyond this comfort and be(come) a caring (self) critic. Surrounding myself not only with likeminded people is something that I need to do more of. I need to do better at embracing divergent thinking that

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<sup>1</sup> DeTurk (2011: 575) sees an ally as one that pursues social justice from a moral perspective, influence the narratives through for example dialogue, is sometimes part of the minority group, values and /or different perspectives and difference and supports and protects the marginalised.

extends thinking, deepens understanding and ultimately, connects with enacting criticality and care.

### **Implications: Criticality and Care Propositions**

In order to work towards advancing new (different) thinking in respect of criticality for post-pandemic higher education, generally and in the SoTL more specifically, I offer some propositions for consideration.

#### ***Pedagogies that Engage Hearts and Minds***

From the perspective of socially just practices, I propose advancing Brown's (2021) notion of trust, intuition, and curiosity. In addition, acknowledging the traumas students and peers experienced during the pandemic and beyond needs to be factored in so that academic-personal-professional-beings (hearts and minds) are valued. Pragmatically, an accompanying focus on content could be a deliberate shift to questioning and critiquing and destabilising inequitable knowledge(s)/knowing/discourses and practices. Facilitating curiosity and infusing criticality (different thinking) about race, gender, religion, politics and discipline in respect of (in)formal curricula/spaces/places could be shared as part of SoTL. I suggest this as I strongly believe in involving and evolving hearts and minds.

#### ***Ontological reflexivity***

Fostering reflection that values contrast/dissent, questions how a phenomenon has evolved and why or to whom it matters is suggested. Moreover, this could be done across disciplines, programmes and courses provided that ontological reflexivity (Willig, 2019) is centered and where pedagogical shifts 'from (re)presentations of facts to practices of critical experimenting and intervening' (Fountain, cited in Fenwick & Edwards, 2014: 47) and bringing in associated views, occur. Willig's (2019) notion of ontological reflexivity speaks to careful, collaborative critique of own beliefs and taken for granted assumptions about reality that requires prompting internal dialogues through external dialogues. These internal/external dialogues – a practice that serves her well as a therapist – I feel, could serve us as university teachers equally well in our endeavours toward criticality with (self) care.

#### ***From Scholarly practice to scholarship with criticality and care***

Our scholarly work (the theories we draw on) and our scholarship (engaging, shaping and moulding learning and teaching in conversation with others) involves being and becoming a 'critical scholar/activist' (Apple, in Bozalek, et al., 2014: xvii). Further, scholarship that explores negativity, domination, and exploitation, critiques and extends theoretical traditions and supports communities, hold much value for infusing criticality with care. On a more technical level, publishing not only in paid for Journals, but also as Open Access (open Creative Commons Licences) and open platforms (Blogs, Op-Eds in newspapers, Social media) could contribute towards caring for the material inequalities that students experience. Criticality as an act of care

implies enhancing reciprocal relationships, where collective benefit is valued, respectful language is used and smiling as an act of charity is promoted (Aghardien, 2022).

### ***Relational Methodologies: Storytelling***

Through advancing and/or promoting relational, dialogic learning and by extension, storytelling (much as I insert my own story in this article), opportunities exist for honouring the power of language as a symbolic artefact that mediates learning (Vygotsky, 1978). It also speaks to principles of Ubuntu<sup>2</sup> which holds that I am because we are. Collaborative and collective activities accompanied by reflection thereon make the implicit, explicit and make the sense-making richer and deeper. The quest to make everything self-directed and individualistic needs to be approached with caution. If flexible modes and choices comes at the expense of deep learning, then we have no choice but to rethink and rework. We have seen how mechanistic such approaches are (repeated cycles of content–read–watch–listen–test) and how dangerous such methodologies have become in a complex society that requires criticality, ethical, evaluative, interpretive understanding and engagement in the world.

### ***Structural and Cultural Shifts***

Interrogating the structures (policies that sometimes inhibit) cultural practices could involve revised policies, differently designed formal/informal spaces (including the virtual ones such as the Learning Management System and MS Teams platforms). I have found that while some students and academics have asked to go back to in person spaces and places, this by no means implies that the one is better than the other. A certain criticality is needed. Taking things at face value and not interrogating the hidden/implicit assumptions and cultures, could foster a certain simplistic account that is counter to a deep, complex appraisal of the work we do and continue to strive towards.

### **Final Word**

The notion of justice is quite critical in thinking about how we move our SoTL work forward, what matters to whom and why and how we as university teachers enact criticality with care. My argument in this paper is that withholding criticality and care is in itself an injustice and further, that self-critique is needed. Through presenting my story or interpretations and integration of criticality and care, I hope that this article helps to add to the discourse around criticality grounded in respect and connected to care.

### **Author biography**

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<sup>2</sup> Ubuntu as a concept is contested and complex. I use the term here to denote in simplistic terms, the notion of our interconnectedness, *a person is a person because of others* (Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu). Despite the current turmoil in (South) African politics and livelihoods, the underpinning Ubuntu values and principles offer hope and trust that we can heal ourselves, our discipline(s) and our world.

include learning and teaching in Higher Education, academic development, social justice and technology integration. She has taught PGDip: Design and Development of Online learning, PGDiPE (HE), a New Directions module and facilitate various workshops on Postgraduate supervision and curriculum development. 

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