

THE THREE CS OF TAFE - COLLEGIALITY, COMPASSION, AND COLLABORATION

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Melissa Preston highlights the role of collegiality, compassion, and collaboration within the context of teaching in TAFE...

The education landscape is constantly evolving, and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions play a pivotal role in imparting vocational skills and knowledge to students. TAFE teachers are instrumental in ensuring the quality of education and the success of these institutions. Among the numerous factors that contribute to the effectiveness of TAFE, collegiality, collaboration, and compassion are key. The importance of these three interrelated aspects, within the context of TAFE teaching, highlights their role in enhancing peda/andragogical practices, teacher development, student outcomes, and the overall learning environment.

Collegiality encompasses a sense of camaraderie, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among colleagues. For TAFE teachers, this means cultivating an environment of open dialogue, constructive feedback, as well as a willingness to collaborate for the betterment of teaching practices and student learning outcomes. Effective collegiality fosters a supportive culture where teachers can learn from each other's experiences, share innovative teaching strategies, and collectively address challenges. This sense of unity enhances job satisfaction (Louis & Kruse, 1995) and promotes a positive work environment, thereby contributing to teacher retention rates within the demanding TAFE landscape.

Collegiality not only enhances the professional growth of teachers but also has a direct impact on student outcomes. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) support the idea that schools (and by extension, TAFE institutions) with a strong sense of collegiality tend to perform better academically. Collaborative planning and curriculum development ensure that courses are aligned with industry standards and meet the evolving needs of students. Furthermore, by engaging in peer observation and feedback, TAFE teachers can enhance their peda/andragogical skills and provide students with more effective learning experiences.

Collaboration extends the concept of collegiality by

emphasising joint efforts to achieve common goals. In the context of TAFE, collaboration is not confined to year-level or faculty interactions; it extends to interdisciplinary teamwork that can lead to comprehensive and holistic learning experiences for students. Hattie (2012) argues that teacher collaboration has a substantial impact on student achievement. Collaborative endeavours allow TAFE teachers to pool their diverse expertise and perspectives, resulting in well-rounded educational experiences for students. In TAFE, collaboration becomes particularly significant as it helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills required in the workforce.

Through interdisciplinary collaboration, TAFE teachers can create complete learning experiences that simulate real-world scenarios. For instance, a collaboration between an automotive and business teacher could lead to the development of a project where students design a business plan for an auto repair shop. Such collaborative projects not only expose students to multiple facets of their chosen field but also foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills. By simulating workplace dynamics, collaboration among TAFE teachers prepares students for the challenges they will encounter in their careers.

In considering how to create positive and nurturing learning environments, compassion refers to the genuine care and concern that TAFE teachers show towards their colleagues and students. TAFE students often come from diverse backgrounds and face a variety of barriers to learning - including neurodiversity, cultural diversity, and damage to the affective domain - therefore, compassion plays a pivotal role in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Teachers who exhibit compassion tend to be more attuned to the needs of their students and can 'cherry pick' between andragogy and pedagogy to tailor their teaching approaches and accommodate different learning styles

and abilities.

Furthermore, compassion among TAFE teachers contributes to a positive workplace culture. Overall, when teachers feel valued and supported, they are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and committed to their roles. This sense of belonging enhances job satisfaction and reduces burnout, which is a common concern not only amongst the mainstream teacher cohort, but the TAFE teacher cohort (Ingersoll, 2003). Compassionate teachers are also more open to collaboration and knowledge sharing, fostering an atmosphere of continuous learning within the institution.

The potent combination of collegiality, collaboration, and compassion among TAFE teachers yields a multitude of benefits that extend beyond the individual teacher and student. Firstly, a culture of collegiality promotes a strong sense of unity among the teaching staff, leading to improved communication and teamwork. This ensures that curriculum development is comprehensive and aligned with industry demands. Collaborative planning and assessment also facilitate the identification of areas needing improvement, allowing for timely adjustments to teaching strategies. Secondly, collaboration among TAFE teachers encourages the sharing of best practices and innovative teaching methods. When teachers collaborate across disciplines, they can incorporate different perspectives into their teaching, resulting in more comprehensive and engaging lessons. Moreover, collaborative projects for students from different courses and faculties encourage interdisciplinary thinking and problem-solving skills, reflecting the complexities of real-world work environments. Lastly, compassion for colleagues and students contributes to a positive institutional climate. When TAFE teachers model empathy and understanding, students are more likely to feel comfortable and motivated in their learning journeys. Compassionate teachers also serve as mentors and role models, inspiring students to pursue their goals and overcome obstacles. Furthermore, a compassionate work environment promotes teacher well-being and retention, which is essential for maintaining institutional stability and long-term growth. While the importance of the 3Cs - collegiality, collaboration, and compassion - among TAFE teachers is clear, there are challenges to achieving and maintaining these aspects within the TAFE environment. Limited time for

collaboration, untenable teaching loads, gatekeeping of information, partially or poorly implemented ICT systems and heavy hierarchies of management hinder effective collaboration and communication despite these being core values of TAFE. The 3Cs can sometimes be overshadowed by burdensome administrative tasks and procedures that are, unfortunately, intrinsically linked to the Government's funding model of TAFE which only serve to compound curriculum pressure. To address these challenges, TAFE must implement strategies such as dedicated time for collaborative planning, adequate and high-level professional development and interdisciplinary workshops, as well as meaningful mentorship programs. TAFE also demonstrates a reluctance for these to occur on a face-to-face basis which demonstrates management's inability to understand that fundamentally education is a social activity. The current ad hoc approach and mishmash of platforms designed for business, not education, further act as inhibitors for teachers to share best practices and partake in the 3Cs. Furthermore, fostering a culture of empathy and appreciation through recognition programs can reinforce compassionate behaviour among TAFE teachers, but again they must be done in a way that is authentic. Collegiality, collaboration, and compassion hold immense significance among TAFE teachers, fostering an environment conducive to effective teaching and student success. Collegiality forms the basis of mutual support and professional growth; collaboration leverages diverse expertise to enhance student learning experiences; and compassion nurtures positive learning environments and teacher well-being. The integration of these three aspects not only benefits teachers and students but also contributes to the overall growth and success of TAFE institutions. By acknowledging and prioritizing collegiality, collaboration, and compassion, TAFE institutions can create a culture of excellence that prepares students for the challenges of the modern workforce.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Preston is a teacher at TAFE NSW. Her specialities include neurodiversity and LLND. The youngest daughter of migrants, Melissa came to teaching late in life after finishing her first degree in 2018. Prior to this Melissa spent nearly 20 years as a qualified financial planner and bank manager.

As the only permanent full-time teacher between Canberra and Sydney, Melissa has a large geographic footprint and is proud to teach, learn and live on Ngambri, Ngunnawal and Gundungurra country. She predominantly teaches on the high school equivalency programs, as well as the occasional specialist program.

Melissa has been active in the NSW Teachers Federation since joining the teaching profession and credits her sanity to activism and the collegially, compassion and collaboration that it brings to her teaching practice.

