Unlearning People-Pleasing

Rand Wang, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Scott Bowering's EDUC 437 (Ethical Issues in Education) course. The assignment asked students to complete an "I-Change" project focused on a specific personal or relational pattern, document their practice of change over the semester, and write a final report that connected lived experiences to course concepts and scholarly sources. The paper uses APA citation style.

This final report explores my I-Change project on unlearning people-pleasing and practicing authenticity in everyday relationships. Anchored by a moment at the gym in which an older woman repeatedly apologized for needing help, I use that encounter as a mirror for my own habit of shrinking myself to avoid disapproval. Across the semester, I trace how people-pleasing shows up in my body and behaviour, including staying quiet in class discussions, lowering my voice, and replaying conversations after the fact. Drawing on Bai's relational ethics, I argue that people-pleasing is not only a private flaw, but an ethical issue that shapes whether genuine connection is possible. I then describe concrete moments of change in academic and community settings, including speaking up in HSCI 486, participating in an Indigenous EDI discussion circle, and navigating tension at home related to harm reduction work. Using Falkenberg's framing of habitual behaviour, Neff's self-compassion, and Kimmerer's reciprocity, I reflect on how discomfort became a teacher rather than a punishment. Ultimately, the report emphasizes that authenticity is an ongoing practice, and that ethical living involves honesty that still cares for the relationship.

The Cost of Being "Not a Bother"

"I should probably ask for help, but I don't want to be a bother!" an older woman admitted to me one evening as she stood in front of the cable machine, a rope attachment hanging loosely in her hands. She had been staring at the equipment for a while, glancing at the diagrams on the side and then back at the unfamiliar pulleys and pins, as if the whole setup was testing whether she belonged there. When I asked if she wanted a hand, she laughed a little and repeated that she knew she should learn, but she did not want to seem annoying.

Together, we clipped the rope onto the cable, adjusted the weight, and practiced pressing the rope down into a tricep pushdown. She kept apologizing as we went, for being slow, for asking questions, for not knowing something she thought she was supposed to already know. I kept telling her she was doing exactly what she was meant to be doing: learning. After a few repetitions, her shoulders dropped and her expression softened. "Oh," she said, surprised, "that is not as hard as I thought."

What stuck with me most from that encounter was how quickly she apologized for needing help at all, like her learning was something she had to justify. I immediately recognized that instinct because it is the same one that shows up in me when I am people-pleasing. I try to make myself seem smaller by softening my voice, holding back my opinions, and apologizing before I even speak. I end up chasing belonging by saying whatever will be easiest for other people to agree with.

Where My People-Pleasing Comes From

That interaction at the cable machine is what made me choose people-pleasing as the focus of my I-Change project, because it showed me how easily "not being a bother" can turn into a habit of self-editing. Throughout this semester, I have been working on changing my relationship with people-pleasing and exploring what it means to act authentically in my everyday interactions.

When I wrote my I-Change project proposal at the start of the semester, I believed people-pleasing was about wanting to avoid conflict. I assumed the solution was to simply verbalize my opinions more often. But after three months of practice, reflection, and discomfort, I have learned that people-pleasing is

intimately tied to how I learned to protect myself, how I was raised as the youngest child in a Chinese immigrant family, and how I navigated the world believing acceptance required hiding the parts of myself that I feared could be controversial.

The Ethical Issue

At the start of the semester, I treated people-pleasing as a private flaw I needed to fix alone. I now understand that the ethical core of this issue is relational. When I censor myself to avoid disapproval, I harm my relationship with myself and with others. Other people do not get the opportunity to know me as I am, which prevents genuine relationships from forming. Bai argues that "ontology entails ethics" and, drawing on Thomas Berry, reminds us that "the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" (Bai, 2001, pp. 1–2). These ideas helped me see that my project is about repairing how I relate to myself and to others, rather than treating people-pleasing as something I should manage on my own.

Through this lens, ethics show up in everyday choices that shape connection and belonging. When I refrain from sharing in a class discussion, I lose the opportunity to present myself authentically. When I sit silently in a group project and wait for others to lead, I sacrifice the possibility of a meaningful contribution to the project. Bai's concept of "sustained attending to the other" helped me see that ethics is rooted in paying sincere attention (Bai, 2001). When I am stuck in people-pleasing, my attention turns inward. I think about how I will be perceived instead of meeting others as equal human beings. This shift helped me reframe my goal. Authenticity became less about pretending and more about offering myself honestly in a relationship.

Relationships and Changing Perspectives

The changes I have made this semester have influenced a variety of areas in my life. In my HSCI 486 class, I sit with students who speak confidently and quickly. Early in the semester, I worried that my ideas would sound naive or unintelligent beside theirs. As part of this project, I began speaking up in class even when I felt anxious to do so. My heart was racing and my palms were sweaty, but the more willing I became to speak openly, the less intimidating my classmates

felt. Instead of seeing them as threats, I started to see them as people who were simply comfortable being themselves.

This growth also shaped my relationships outside the classroom. This semester, I joined an Indigenous EDI discussion circle in the Faculty of Health Sciences, where we discussed topics relating to personal experiences. Initially, I worried that sharing my vulnerable perspectives as a second-generation immigrant would come across as overly emotional. But guided by Edlinger et al.'s (2021) idea of enoughness as "a state or condition of having and being enough, thereby negating the need for an external reference point" (p. 159), I tried to let my voice be good enough instead of crafting a polished facade. When I began to speak about my own experiences, others often followed by sharing theirs, and the circle shifted from abstract concepts to a shared learning space that felt more empowering than learning from a textbook. Edlinger et al. note that enoughness is "rooted in the absence of a desire for something bigger, better or more" (p. 162), and in those moments, I felt this. By being honest, I not only felt more genuine myself, but also helped create an environment where everyone in the room could participate more fully.

What I Learned About Myself

This project helped me see how deeply rooted my people-pleasing habits are. For most of my childhood, I believed my value came from being easy to get along with. As the youngest child in my family, I learned to avoid conflict to maintain harmony. Growing up with a large mole on my cheek, I also knew that I stood out physically in ways I could not control, so I tried to compensate by controlling how I acted and presented myself, internalizing the idea that belonging required shrinking and hiding.

Over the semester, I often found myself adjusting my posture to take up less space, softening my voice, apologizing before speaking in group projects and replaying conversations in my head, worrying about how I had come across. Falkenberg's (2012) description of behaviour as often "automatic or habitual, occurring without any conscious control over the initiation as well as the execution phase" gave me a way to understand this (p. 26). Seeing these reactions as habits rather than fixed flaws made them feel more manageable. For instance, on days when I noticed my voice shaking while sharing in HSCI 486 and still

chose to finish my points, I found that I replayed the conversation less on the car ride home and felt more settled in my own skin.

Kristin Neff's TED talk on self-compassion changed how I related to the discomfort that comes with changing these established patterns. Her reminder that "the pain of life is inevitable for all of us" helped me see my anxiety during my HSCI 486 presentation as part of being human, not as proof of failure or inadequacy, which is how I usually interpret it (Neff, 2013). As I waited to present, I practiced speaking to myself more empathetically when I noticed my racing heart and my shaky hands. That change allowed me to treat discomfort as a teacher rather than a punishment, and to keep practicing authenticity even when it felt intimidating.

Kimmerer's writing on reciprocity broadened my understanding of what this change is for. When she says that "reciprocity, returning the gift, is not just good manners; it is how the biophysical world works" (Kimmerer, 2014, p. 23), I began to see my voice as one of the gifts I can return to the communities that have shaped me. This landed especially strongly because so much of my life has been about receiving from others: my parents' sacrifices as Chinese immigrants, the guidance of teachers and mentors, the emotional openness of patients who trusted me with their stories. Thus, when I began doing harm reduction education with NaloxHome this semester, I wanted to return something to communities that carry the weight of the overdose crisis, instead of treating their suffering as an abstract issue I learn about in class. Framing my voice as a gift shifted my focus from "Do I sound smart enough?" to "How can I show up in a way that honours the relationships I am already part of?" Speaking up became less about proving myself and more about participating responsibly with my family, classmates and the future communities I hope to serve.

Appreciating the Complexity

I initially wanted this project to have a clear finish line. I imagined speaking up more in class, feeling less anxious, and "fixing" my people-pleasing. Throughout the term, I realized that there is no final version of this work. I will always feel uncomfortable in some situations. There will always be conversations where I fall silent. But I understand now that growth does not erase fear; it teaches me to adapt to it.

I also noticed that authenticity is not always welcomed, and there were many times when being honest made my relationships feel more strained. When I disagreed with a friend's political view on prohibiting transgender affirming therapies, it created a significant divide between us that we are still navigating. At home, my volunteering with NaloxHome has brought tension with my parents, who struggle to understand why people would need naloxone at all. Their view is that people simply should not use drugs, shaped by growing up in China, where unprescribed drug use often carries the death penalty. When I talked about safe supply, naloxone training, or why I care about this work, it felt like we were speaking from different worlds, and I was torn between my commitment to harm reduction and my desire to honour my parents' perspectives. These experiences showed me that ethical living is not about always keeping the peace, but about choosing honesty that still cares for the relationship and staying with the discomfort that follows. I am beginning to see that my work on people-pleasing is connected to larger questions of how I will navigate disagreement and stigma in future health settings, where much more than my own comfort is at stake. While I do not feel finished with these changes, I feel more equipped than ever to adapt to discomfort and to respond in ways that honour both myself and the people I am in relationships with in my future.

References

Bai, H. (2001). *Learning to value the world intrinsically.* Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice.

Edlinger, G., Ungericht, B., & Deimling, D. (2021). Enoughness: Exploring the potentialities of having and being enough. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization, 21*(2), 157–182.

Falkenberg, T. (2012). Teaching as contemplative professional practice.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2014). Returning the gift. *Minding Nature, 7*(2), 20–26.

Neff, K. (2013). *The space between self-esteem and self-compassion* [TEDx talk]. TEDxCentennialParkWomen.

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Student Learning Commons to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize and includes publication on the Simon Fraser University website or in the SLC Writing Contest Open Journal.

Available from: https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/slc-uwc