



'A little bit better': Living the first-year experience through compassionate coordination

Kate (Katya) Schmidt Sullivan, Heriot-Watt University, Scotland

ABSTRACT

This reflective analysis explores the complex multivalent identity work involved in supporting first-year learners in undergraduate business education. As the first-year coordinator for a large Management discipline, I am increasingly aware of the intersecting pedagogical, emotional, and systemic demands placed on both students and educators during this critical transition. In this research-informed piece, I reflect on how supporting diverse learners—many of whom are returning to education, navigating undiagnosed neurodiversity, or entering unfamiliar academic and cultural environments—requires a conscious rethinking of success, belonging, and care.

Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution, I share an evolving philosophy of 'a little bit better'—a pragmatic, human-centred approach to fostering student wellbeing, confidence, and identity development. This ethos is expressed through small but meaningful interventions in curriculum design, assessment policy, classroom practice, and student support that seek to create space for becoming: becoming more confident, more connected, more capable. Drawing from practitioner experience, this article examines how early-year teaching and coordination involve subtle but sustained acts of scaffolding—not only for students, but for staff navigating the tensions between institutional expectations and pedagogical care.

Framed through themes of personalisation, preparedness, and professional identity, this analysis contributes to current conversations around the first-year experience, inclusive education, and belonging. It also offers a practitioner's perspective on leadership in liminal spaces: where institutional structures are fixed, but everyday practice remains fluid, responsive, and deeply personal.

Keywords: First-year experience, inclusive pedagogy, human-centred praxis, identity complexity, critical reflexivity

Context

The first week of semester always begins the same way: a cluster of faces—hopeful, anxious, curious—gathering outside the lecture theatre. Some are fresh from secondary school; others carry children's school timetables in their diaries or the quiet fatigue of balancing work and caregiving. They arrive in mismatched confidence, all trying to decide who they might become here.

As First-Year Coordinator for our Management discipline, I meet them at that threshold. My job, officially, is to make sure the timetable works, assessments align, and staff know what they're doing. My job, in practice, is to *hold the transition together*—to make it, in my private mantra, 'a little bit better' for each person crossing that invisible line between aspiration and belonging.

The emotional architecture of the first year

The first year is less a curriculum than an ecosystem. Students navigate competing pressures—identity, income, culture, self-belief—while we, their teachers, navigate systems built for efficiency rather than humanity. To paraphrase a giant in the field of educator reflection, Brookfield (2017) has suggested that teaching proceeds from a moment of insight followed by a lifetime of correction. Each semester offers both.

Recent work on relational and critical practice in higher education reminds us that belonging is not a static state but an ongoing negotiation shaped as much by institutional structures as by interpersonal encounters, as Gravett (2023) has noted. In a post-pandemic tertiary landscape marked by widening participation, precarity, and intensified performance metrics, the first year has become both more urgent and more fragile. What students encounter in these early months can either consolidate confidence or quietly erode it.

I’ve learned that success in this space rarely comes from grand initiatives; it comes from *attunement*. A student confides they haven’t read for class because English isn’t their first language and the text felt like “a wall of noise.” Another worries they are “too old” to fit in. A third, neurodivergent and undiagnosed, hides in the back row until group work forces contact. None of these challenges are solved by a policy document. They are met instead by small acts of presence—asking different questions, reframing assessment rubrics, redesigning slides to speak to multiple modes of processing. These are the quiet pedagogies of care.

bell hooks described education as “the practice of freedom” (1994). Freedom, in this sense, is not abstraction but permission—to speak differently, learn differently, *be* differently. When a student begins to see that permission reflected back at them, belonging ceases to be an institutional slogan and becomes a lived relation. That’s the moment I’m chasing each semester.

Moments of practice

One student, returning to study after fifteen years in retail, submitted her first essay a week late. She apologised with such visible shame that the lateness seemed the least important thing in the room. We sat down together; I showed her how academic writing is less about sounding clever than finding a rhythm of thought. Her next submission began, “I didn’t think I was smart enough to do this—but now I think maybe I am.” That single line justified every re-write of every induction handbook I’ve ever done.

Another day, a colleague and I debated the fairness of our participation marks. “We’re rewarding confidence,” I realised, “not engagement.” So we trialled reflective prompts instead of attendance points—students earned credit for articulating *how* they engaged, not just *that* they did. The change required no approval chain, no new software, only a willingness to trust students’ own accounts of learning. As Gravett (2023) reminds us in her work on relational pedagogy, mattering is experienced when learners see their perspectives shaping the environment itself.

There are moments, too, when incrementalism is not enough. Student evaluations and focus groups sometimes reveal patterns that require more than gentle adjustment: a curriculum that assumes prior knowledge unevenly distributed; assessment structures that inadvertently privilege confidence over capability (Zepke & Leach, 2010). In these moments, ‘a little bit better’ becomes a gateway rather than a limit—an opening toward more comprehensive, structured redesign. Small acts of empathy can illuminate where deeper reform is necessary.

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And sometimes ‘a little bit better’ means looking after the staff who look after the students. Coordinating a large programme often feels like running triage in an emotional emergency room: endless messages, conflicting expectations, and the creeping sense that care has no off-switch. I keep a sticky note on my desk that reads, *You are not the entire system*. It’s a reminder that leadership in liminal spaces is about influence, not control—creating conditions where others can also make things better.

Becoming together

If first-year coordination has taught me anything, it’s that becoming is never a solo project. We—students, lecturers, administrators—are all improvising belonging in real time. Some mornings I feel like a translator between bureaucratic dialects and human stories; other days I’m simply learning to listen. In staff meetings I’ve started asking, “What does success *feel* like for you this week?” The question catches people off guard, but it opens a softer kind of dialogue about wellbeing and capacity.

In these exchanges I recognise my own transition. I entered academia through psychology and anthropology, fields obsessed with how people make meaning. Later, design thinking taught me that systems change through prototypes: you build, test, learn, repeat. The ‘make it a bit better’ ethos is my pedagogical prototype—an iterative commitment to compassion. It rejects perfectionism while refusing cynicism, echoing Clegg’s reminder that time in higher education is always future-oriented: we teach not just *content*, but *possibility*.

Sometimes the work feels heavy. Students drop out; initiatives stall; policies shift faster than culture. Yet even in frustration there is community. The European First Year Experience network has long framed transition as shared labour, a ‘movement for change’ sustained through stories. Mine is one of those stories—a small node in a larger web of people trying, in countless contexts, to make learning spaces that dignify becoming.

A gentle invitation

On the last day of the semester, I ask my students to write one thing they’ve learned about themselves. Their notes fill a box in my office. “I can actually ask for help.” “I still belong here after failing something.” “I’m not just a mum; I’m a student again.” Reading them, I see the collective work of dozens of small adjustments—each a thread in the tapestry of first-year success.

To be a coordinator in this space is to live permanently in the middle: between structure and story, policy and personhood. The progress is rarely linear, the wins often invisible, but the practice endures. A timetable re-aligned so a commuter can make pickup time. A module description rewritten in plain English. A colleague reminded me that empathy is data, too. Each act accumulates.

Yet I am increasingly aware of the tension embedded in this philosophy. Business programmes, like many professionally oriented degrees, are bound by accreditation standards, learning outcomes, and progression requirements. We lack endless time to try again; there are thresholds students must cross. Compassion does not dissolve criteria. The question, then, is not *whether* standards matter, but *how* they are encountered (Thomas, 2012). How large must the steps be? How much iteration can a system afford? The answers vary across institutions and national contexts, shaped by funding models, regulatory cultures, and histories of widening participation. In my own context, I have come to see that small, relational adjustments can coexist with rigour—provided expectations are transparent and support is proactive.

Making it ‘a little bit better’ isn’t modesty—it’s method. It is not an argument against structural reform, nor against ambitious programme-level redesign. Rather, it is a commitment to ensuring that whatever scale of change we pursue—incremental or comprehensive—remains grounded in lived experience. It’s how we honour the unfinished nature of education and of ourselves. We become by helping others become, one small, deliberate kindness at a time.

Biography

Dr Kate (Katya) Schmidt Sullivan is an Assistant Professor of Strategy and Enterprise at Scotland’s Heriot-Watt University. Her research focuses on motivation, work–life intersections, and inclusive pedagogy. She works across psychology, anthropology, and design, currently exploring game-based learning and experiences of neurodiversity.

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