

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> Kingston University (KU) & Guildhall School of Music & Drama (GSMD) (jointly)		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 33		
<b>Title of case study:</b> 'Taking Care': Enhancing UK nursing training using mixed-methods drama research to reconceptualise, teach and promote embodied 'care' in clinical interactions		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> March 2016–present		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Dr Alex Mermikides	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Senior Lecturer in Drama (KU); Doctoral Programme Leader (GSMD)	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 01/09/04–30/06/17 (KU); 01/07/17–present (GSMD)
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> September 2016–present		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		

**1. Summary of the impact** (indicative maximum 100 words)

UK nursing trainees are better prepared to deliver patient-centred care as a result of 'Taking Care' (TC), a mixed methods drama research project. TC has so far benefited nursing educators at 16 HEIs, and over 2,500 trainees, by bringing the tools and resources to teach ethical care and communication skills into their nursing curricula. TC is also shaping pedagogical conversations in the sector as an exemplar of the utility of performance-making methods in healthcare education more generally, and has brought arts and health practitioners and policymakers together to their mutual benefit. Consequently, TC has made a systematic incorporation of arts-based approaches to healthcare education a much higher priority, and triggered the formation of the new, nationwide Performance and Care Working Group.

**2. Underpinning research** (indicative maximum 500 words)

The 2013 Francis Report, investigating the failures of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust, detailed the negative impact of inadequate nursing care and hospital understaffing on patient health outcomes, most notably increased mortality rates. Its key recommendations included an ethos of 'putting the patient first', and training to ensure prospective nurses are sufficiently 'caring' individuals. 'Taking Care' (TC), a body of drama research undertaken by Kingston University (KU) and Guildhall School of Music & Drama (GSMD), identifies and addresses two significant challenges faced by nursing educators in the face of these imperatives: a) how to teach the sensitive and effective communication of 'care', and b) how to prepare students for the demanding emotional labour required by their profession. TC's central output is the series of performances *Careful* [R1], and the project also draws upon and feeds into a body of research comprising reflective [R2; R3; R4] and pedagogic [R5] works. Because this project operates iteratively and in conjunction with its stakeholders, the underpinning research and its impact are interwoven.

The use of arts-based tools in the pedagogy of other fields is fairly well established, especially in medical education, but is under-researched and -utilised in nursing training specifically. The Nursing and Midwifery Council's response to the Francis Report's criticisms promoted nurses' cultivation of 'compassion' and 'care' to embed patient-centred practice. However, a focus on 'compassion' overlooks the skilled nature of this practice, and the emotional toll it takes on the caregiver. Disregarding the first leads to low recruitment and the second to burnout, manifested in high attrition rates, ultimately resulting in poor patient outcomes. Within the existing nursing curriculum there is little attention to how trainees might 'care' for patients in demanding workplaces without compromising their own emotional wellbeing.

Nurses occupy a distinct position in healthcare due to their increased emotional exposure and the perceived lack of skill and professionalism attached to 'care', and for hospital patients and their families nurses are the most frequent point of contact with staff. Small gestures such as word choice, tone of voice and stance can carry strong emotional significance, especially in vulnerable moments. This was observed first-hand by TC's principal investigator, drama researcher-practitioner Alex Mermikides, while caring for a seriously ill close relative. Thus there are parallels between nursing and theatrical practice, as in clinical interactions nurses and patients watch each other as audiences watch performers, attuned to the 'meaning' of their

### Impact case study (REF3)

actions. Drawing on these similarities, TC explores the relationship between drama and healthcare education.

TC began with a five-month residency in KU's Nursing School (summer 2016, supported by Arts Council England). Mermikides used ethnographic and archival research methods (including access to unpublished interviews with nurses who trained or worked at St George's Hospital, regular meetings with nursing teaching staff and lesson observations) to explore how nurses learn to perform care. Following this, Mermikides conducted research workshops with a team of professional performers, nursing trainees and educators. These combined practical activities to test different uses of performance skills, analysis of existing dramatic representations of nursing, and discussions and focus group interviews. These workshops form a wing of the research practice at the heart of TC: 'devising' (a collaborative, democratic tool for performance-making, its ethos underpins TC in both subject and methodology).

During the devising process, Mermikides' ensemble created fictional scenarios based on the five central themes emerging from the background research: caring too much; being unable to provide adequate attention; 'difficult' patients, vigilance exhaustion; and (following the Francis Report) fear of being judged. The ensemble used physical theatre techniques to get 'under the skin' of nurses by observing and embodying basic nursing procedures, and translating them into choreographed movement. Rehearsals and early work-in-progress performances took place in a simulated ward, with the audience in beds to accentuate the theatrical nature of nurse-patient interactions. This device foregrounded nurses' perspectives while putting viewers in the patient's position, highlighting the intersubjectivity and embodied aspect of clinical encounters and demonstrating care as a *skill* [R3; R4]. These expressionistic and immersive elements mean that the resulting performance is distinct from the 'naturalistic' style more commonly used in healthcare education. Each subsequent performance has developed the show further, in response to audience feedback (post-show discussions, focus groups, questionnaires) and ongoing desk research.

The process of devising *Careful* revealed that care can be understood as a skilled practice rather than an inherent virtue. Like performance, it depends on subtle orchestrations of words, gestures, bodies and space in order to convey emotion and meaning. Approaches used to train physical theatre performers are therefore shown to be adaptable for nursing education, to help nurses manage the unique emotional content of their clinical encounters. Above all, TC research led to a reconception of care as a relational feedback loop, countering the pervasive view that compassionate care is conferred from nurse to patient [R4].

Initial performances of *Careful* were staged in KU's simulated hospital ward (September 2016), Rose Theatre Studio (November 2016), and at the University of Surrey's Ivy Arts Centre (March 2017), mostly to trainee nurses. Positive audience response led KU nursing department to invite Mermikides to teach the insights and techniques arising from TC via a practical class for year 1 BSc Adult Nursing students at KU (June 2017). Following Mermikides' move to GSMD in July 2017, two further classes for years 2 and 3 (launched in summer 2018 and 2019), a headline performance in the main house at the Rose (summer 2018), digital workpacks (May 2020; [R5]), and a *Careful* tour (postponed due to Covid-19) have been commissioned, researched and developed. Dissemination activities also include a major symposium, Performance for Care, co-convened by Mermikides.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] Mermikides, A. (Director) et al. (various iterations, 2016 onwards). *Careful*. [Funded by an Arts Council England grant of GBP14,531 (GFTA-00004950) and similar funding from GSMD following internal peer review]

[R2] Weitkamp, E. and Mermikides, A. (2016). [Medical performance and the 'inaccessible' experience of illness: an exploratory study](#), *Medical Humanities*, 42(3), pp. 186-193. [international peer-reviewed journal by the *British Medical Journal*]

**Impact case study (REF3)**

[R3] Mermikides, A. (2016). *Performance and the medical body*. Methuen Bloomsbury.  
[Assessed as 3\* and 4\* for GSMD by 4 external experts]

[R4] Mermikides, A. (2020). *Performance, medicine and the human*. Methuen Bloomsbury  
[Assessed as 4\* for GSMD by 2 external experts; submitted by GSMD in REF2]

[R5] Mermikides, A. (2020). Digital workpacks 'Careful encounters' and 'Drama out of a crisis'  
[available upon request]

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

The most direct impact has been on the estimated 2,500 trainee nurses exposed to performances of the show and/or its associated learning resources. Linked is the impact on pedagogy more broadly, with 15 higher education institutions (HEIs) and 1 NHS hospital committing to integrate TC's findings into their training in the form of performances, practical classes or uptake of remote resources. There is also a developing impact at a national arts and healthcare education policy level with early signs of buy-in from several key stakeholders.

**Impact on Trainees/Professionals: 'Sometimes nursing is like theatre'** (student quoted in [E1])

To date, TC research findings have been rendered into later iterations of *Careful* [R1], 3 practical classes for KU students (one for each year of study) and a pair of interactive digital workpacks [R5] created in response to the move to online learning due to Covid-19.

Over 600 nursing students at KU have participated in the classes, with one cohort of 200 students having participated in a class in each year of their degree programme. Participants reported enhanced awareness of the embodied, interpersonal and affective dimensions of their role, and increased confidence about managing both their own and their patients' emotions [E1]. The learning from these classes has had a lasting effect on participants' clinical practice. According to an article in the *Nursing Standard*: '*around 90% of those taking part think the workshops will have a positive effect on their practice, while around 85% said they had drawn on the learning during their next placement*' [E2]. Likewise, reports suggested '*In each [class] a potential impact of awareness or implementation was recorded for at least 90% of participants*' [E1]. As one student reported, the classes also help to bridge the gap between theory and practice: "*I really understand what I am writing about communication in my essay instead of just reading about it*" [E1].

Trainee and established professionals report changes of perspective about their professional practice as a result of viewing *Careful*, the live performances of which have been seen by 600 trainees in addition to over 1,200 views of the recording. A trainee reflects, '*there were elements of dance in the performance, which is obviously physically demanding. [...] It made me realise that, as nurses, we are also on our feet for 12 hours. Our priority is to meet everyone else's physical needs but we don't have that empathy towards ourselves. It felt like a reality check*' [E2]. Even very experienced nurses have found that TC's findings have changed their perspectives: '*one of the reasons I stopped being involved with nursing is because I've been trying to talk about these things [the findings of Mermikides' research] for years and nobody cared. [...] There's something here, in [Mermikides'] work, that allows us to reinterrogate what we fail to do for [...] people who have decided to lend us their heart [i.e. nurses] [...] and that somehow we still collectively and culturally abandon*' [E3].

An estimated 1,300 students at 9 UK and European institutions have received digital workpacks created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially developed for KU, where 600 trainees have engaged with them, 3 other HEIs subsequently requested access to the packs. On the basis of this interest, they were offered to and taken up by another 5 HEIs, 2 of which appointed Mermikides to lead online classes centred on the packs as a result. The first workpack ensured that findings from *Careful* (sensitising students to the ways their embodiment can affect patients' feelings) can be delivered through remote learning. The second adapts strategies used by performers to cope with the demands of performance to help students who entered practice earlier than anticipated due to Covid-19 handle stress.

### Impact on Nursing Curricula: 'A hugely significant contribution to nursing pedagogy' [E6]

Mermikides' research, and the sustained collaboration it involved with two nursing lecturers at KU, has led to the expansion of the Adult Nursing degree programme to include TC workshops as core curriculum in all year groups. This is especially significant given the 'crowded' and highly-regulated nature of the nursing curriculum.

The utility of Mermikides' research for nursing pedagogy has also been recognised by other HEIs; 11 Heads of Department committed to host performances of *Careful* together with post-show discussions and staff development events in 2020. This includes Edinburgh Napier University, which secured a Teaching Fellowship for Mermikides with a value of approximately GBP10,000 to enable more extensive consultation. The resulting tour of *Careful* was disrupted due to Covid-19, but the firm commitment to these activities in itself signifies impact on the established practice of nursing education. Several of these institutions have sustained the relationship despite this disruption, through uptake of the digital workpacks. An example is the University of the West of England (UWE) where '*the online resources [Mermikides] provided are being used in two nursing modules*' [E4]. UWE also appointed Mermikides to run a webinar introducing TC performance-based approaches to healthcare lecturers (20 September 2020). This attracted 40 participants from UWE and beyond, reflecting the fact that '*discussions around the use of arts-based approaches to teaching and learning in the Department of Nursing & Midwifery [at UWE] have increased since we have become aware of [Mermikides'] work*' [E7].

Two of the most important nursing skills, as identified by Marie Curie (2016) and the Royal College of Nursing (2016), are sensitive and effective communication and emotional resilience. However, these are both difficult to teach and often squeezed out of a curriculum that prioritises medical knowledge. TC's research processes and findings offer practical, research-backed methods and insights, which have been '*transformational to the teaching staff and nursing students it has involved*' [E2]. TC has provided the nursing education sector with meaningful pedagogical tools that can support the development of overlooked skills. TC also offers a model for how collaborations across the arts and humanities and healthcare might develop to deliver similar outcomes in other areas.

### Impact on Arts and Health Policy: 'This work has advanced thinking' [E5]

In March 2020 Mermikides convened a virtual symposium, 'Performance for Care' ([www.performanceforcare.com](http://www.performanceforcare.com)), in partnership with King's College London and The King's Fund, designed to pursue the policy implications of the TC project. This attracted over 400 healthcare educators and arts and health practitioners and policymakers internationally. The President of the Royal College of Nursing wrote that '*the Performance for Care event revealed the need for more systematic survey of how performance is being used in nursing education across the UK*' [E6]. As a result of the symposium, the Deputy Head of Research and Evaluation at Public Health Wales set up the Performance and Care Working Group, '*developing a new national group that is bringing together people working across nursing, performance and the arts to start doing a lot more work in that area [...]. Dr Mermikides has been the group's anchor in terms of its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings*' [E7]. Mermikides was invited to be a core member of this UK-wide group and to give a keynote presentation at its inaugural event 'Performing for Real' in November 2020.

Performance for Care also alerted the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Arts, Health and Wellbeing to the '*considerable*' policy implications of TC [E5]. As a result, Mermikides had several meetings with an APPG representative, which served to inform and re-prioritise their strategy to address recommendation 8 of their Creative Health report 2017 ('that the education of clinicians, public health specialists and other health and care professionals includes accredited modules on the evidence base and practical use of the arts for health and wellbeing'). For them, '*Mermikides' research is helping to shape the conversation about how the arts can enhance interpersonal skills within the healthcare workforce, thereby improving patient satisfaction and,*

**Impact case study (REF3)**

*in some cases, health outcomes* [E5]. Mermikides was invited to present the TC project at a roundtable event on the theme of care in November 2020.

One of TC's biggest successes is its evaluative underpinnings, which prove the efficacy of physical theatre as an educational tool. As noted by the APPG, *'[t]here is a significant evidence gap around the arts' role in health and wellbeing, specifically for nursing education. [...] Mermikides' work is helping to fill that gap'* [E5]. The evidence base built in to TC's research design has also been praised by Public Health Wales: *'[p]roving that it works as a contribution to [these] pedagogical challenge[s] for nursing studies has been core'* [E7].

The impact on the 'arts in healthcare' sector through changed perception and reception of such initiatives is further underscored by Clod Ensemble, a pioneer of arts-based medical education that has engaged with Mermikides' research since 2014. They write that: *'by showing how the practice is underpinned by theory from applied arts and performance studies, Dr Mermikides' work has helped to make the case for the growth of practical interventions of these kinds. [...] Mermikides' research has profoundly influenced the sector within which our work exists'* [E8].

The cherry on top: 'Elevating nursing' [E9]

The necessity and power of TC's tools of representation is significant not just for increasing staff retention and enabling more 'care-ful' clinical encounters, but for morale and professional integrity; as one student nurse audience member of *Careful* (who also participated in research workshops and is now in practice) reflected in *The Guardian*, *'elevating nursing to the level of art gave me another reason to be proud of the choice I have made to become one'* [E9].

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[E1] Emery, C. (2020). The impact of practical classes using research from 'Taking Care' on their participants [report]

[E2] Pearce, L. (20 August 2020). Drama workshops are helping nursing students find their voice. *Nursing Standard* <https://rcni.com/nursing-standard/students/nursing-studies/drama-workshops-are-helping-nursing-students-to-find-their-voice-164601>

[E3] Testimonial footage from former senior nurse <https://performanceforcare.com/discussion/>

[E4] Testimonial letter from Senior Lecturer in Nursing, UWE

[E5] Testimonial letter from Secretary to the APPG for Arts, Health and Wellbeing/Director of Arts and Health South West

[E6] Testimonial letter from the President of the Royal College of Nursing

[E7] Testimonial letter from Deputy Head of Research and Evaluation, Public Health Wales

[E8] Testimonial letter from Director of Clod Ensemble

[E9] Partos, H. (14 December 2016). Play the part: theatre show teaches student nurses compassion. *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2016/dec/14/theatre-show-teaching-student-nurses-compassion>