


A Qualitative Exploration of Students' Perception of Care When Learning Online: Implications for Online Teaching and Faculty Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

The dramatic shift to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted certain global challenges associated with online learning, including our need to better understand the nature of caring relationships in online learning. In the present study, Noddings's care-centered model of education was applied to explore students' perception of care and caring behaviors in online courses and the design and pedagogical practices associated with a sense of being cared for based on interviews with 14 online learners. Findings from this study support the notion that online learning environments are robust enough to allow for caring relations to emerge. However, the analysis of student data pointed to a possible missing element in Noddings's model when applied to online learning, namely "anticipating." Further, the study highlighted the critical role played by instructors' competencies in designing collaborative learning activities and feedback processes in the enactment of care ethics when teaching online. A discussion of findings and their implications for online teaching is provided.

KEYWORDS

Care Theory, Ethics of Care, Faculty Professional Development, Online Learning, Online Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Due to the unprecedented scale at which digital technologies and online learning are being adopted globally, tending to issues of emotional engagement and experiences of online students become even more critical if we are to create online learning experiences that are transformative and empowering (Burke & Larmar, 2020; Corbera et al., 2020; Gravett et al., 2021; Rose, 2017; Singh, 2017). The expansion of online learning opportunities and the flexibility it offers has allowed non-traditional students access to education and lifelong learning, but it has also created additional challenges including the need to respond to the diversity in online students' social, economic, and cultural backgrounds as well as the variation in their goals, needs, and expectations compared

DOI: 10.4018/IJOPCD.333715

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to on-campus cohorts (Burke & Larmar, 2020). Another major challenge associated with online learning is the physical distance and the resulting sense of disengagement and isolation, which can lead to communication gaps and a decline in student engagement when learning online (Al-Freih, 2021; Greer, 2023; Kızılcık & Türüdü, 2022; Moore, 1993; Singh, 2017). The physical distance and diversity in online learners' profiles necessitates careful consideration of the human element and how to cultivate a strong sense of identity, belonging, and connectedness in the digital space (Burke & Larmar, 2020; Greer, 2023; Robinson et al., 2017; Rose, 2017; Singh, 2017; Uusiautti et al., 2017). As opportunities and demand for online learning increase, it is crucial to understand the student experience if we are to design effective and sustainable online learning experiences that acknowledge and recognize the ethical, emotional, psychological, and social implications of technology integration for student learning and development.

As Moore et al. (2022) noted, little scholarship existed on online students' mental health and emotional well-being prior to the pandemic. However, the sudden and disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education at all levels highlighted major areas in need of re-evaluation to enable a sustainable culture of inclusivity and care in our online learning and teaching practices (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Corbera et al., 2020; Gravett et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2021). That said, scholars have suggested that the role of care and caring relations may be even more significant in online learning environments given the unique affordances and limitations they present (Burke & Larmar, 2020; Deacon, 2012; Greer, 2023; Robinson et al., 2020; Rose, 2017; Rose & Adams, 2014; Tang et al., 2021).

So, how are caring relations established and maintained in online learning spaces? What behaviors (i.e., instructors' actions and dispositions towards students and the course), pedagogical practices (i.e., strategies, techniques, and activities used to support student learning and engagement), and design elements (i.e., digital tools, resources, and course content and structure that shape the online learning space) do students perceive as being indications of care? And what are the skills and competencies needed by instructors to enact caring pedagogies when teaching online? The purpose of this study is to explore these questions based on the lived experiences of online students through the lens of Noddings's care theory (1984, 2008, 2012). Specifically, the topics of inquiry that guided this study included the following:

1. What instructor behaviors, pedagogical choices, and design elements do students perceive as caring when learning online?
2. From a student perspective, what are the skills and literacies needed by instructors to enact ethical care when teaching online?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Noddings's Ethics of Care

One of the most influential figures in shaping our understanding of care ethics and its central role in education is Noddings (1984, 2005, 2008, 2012). Noddings identifies establishing and maintaining caring relations as foundational to the practice of teaching (Noddings, 1984). In ethical care, according to Noddings, caring relations are characterized by "engrossment" and "nonselective receptivity" to the expressed needs of the cared-for (Noddings, 2005, 2012). The carer in these instances sets aside their personal assumptions and preconceived notions or values. Instead, receptive attention is what guides caring relations between the carer and the cared-for, in which the attention of the carer is genuine, nonjudgmental, and receptive to "what-is-there in the other's message" (Noddings, 2008, p. 163). Central to Noddings's philosophy is the relational nature of care: an encounter can only be characterized as caring when the cared-for acknowledges and recognizes that care has been received (Noddings, 2005).

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