Acknowledging another face in the virtual crowd: Reimagining the online experience in higher education through an online pedagogy of care

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Article word count: 7545

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With the rapid expansion of online learning as a dominant pedagogical approach in higher education, significant research has been undertaken to explore the impacts of internet-based technologies to promote student engagement. Current advances in online learning have fostered innovative, and often nuanced approaches to teaching and learning that have the potential to promote rich and potentially transformative learning outcomes for higher education students. However, there is a growing body of evidence that clearly highlights that online learning may have a deleterious impact on a student's sense of connection, leading to experiences of isolation and disempowerment. Such experiences call for an ongoing reimagination of the online teaching space to ensure that students maintain a strong sense of identity within their virtual educational community. This paper emphasises an approach to online learning that serves to foster positive engagement across the student lifecycle. Using Noddings' (2010) framework of Moral Education, we engaged in the process of critical reflection on our own teaching over time, using student data to support analyses. Based upon the outcomes of this longitudinal process, we propose an online pedagogy of care: a teaching orientation that challenges the dominant, often reactively driven learning and teaching practices influenced by the commodification of higher education internationally.

Key words: higher education, online learning, e-learning, online pedagogy, care in education, student experience

Introduction

The massification of higher education (HE) globally over the last two decades has resulted in the marketisation of tertiary learning, conceptualising students as customers of a service (Baker, Hunter & Thomas, 2016). This trend has impacted on the quality of experiences of HE for students over time (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016), necessitating an ongoing review of teaching and learning practices. With the global expansion of HE, combined with greater access to digital technologies, the last decade has seen a rise in HE students choosing online course offerings (also known as e-learning) in preference to traditional face-to-face instruction (Greenland & Moore, 2014). This trend has influenced student interaction within the online learning space, including their engagement with their learning, peers, and instructors.

While there are a range of definitions to conceptualise online learning, there is a general consensus that it involves engagement in learning experiences facilitated through the use of specific technologies (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). In some contexts online learning involves "blended" approaches, including face-to-face on-campus learning supported by online content delivery and interaction. This contrasts with fully online modes of study where no on-campus interaction is required, and learning is facilitated through virtual interaction that permits students to engage with the content, their peers and instructor via a learning management system.

While the utility of this approach has merit in terms of providing an expedient and accessible experience of learning, there is growing evidence that recognises a disparity between the engagement of student cohorts studying in either face-to-face and/or blended modes of delivery and those enrolled as fully online students, with online engagement being typically lower (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). In particular, research has highlighted that online students are less likely to experience a sense of identity and personal engagement with their learning, their peers and their instructor (Rose, 2017). Noddings (1992; 1998; 2005; 2010) has focused extensively on care in pedagogical relationships, which has stimulated significant interest in the role of care in classrooms, and it is suggested that the role of care and connection in online environments may be even more significant, given the recognised disparity in engagement between online and on-campus learners. However, while research has been conducted in face-to-face contexts, there is little research into the role and application of care online, highlighting a significant gap, in understanding (Rose, 2014). While acknowledging the significant emphasis of studies comparing online courses with traditional methods of delivery, Bucy (2003) argues that research should give greater focus to online approaches rather than replicating traditional methods of teaching using online technologies.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the potentially transformative impacts of what we propose as an *online pedagogy of care*. This arose in response to a shared inquiry into the ways that care was enacted in their respective online courses, and how this might enhance the student experience. We have individually accumulated over a decade of experience in facilitating online learning within HE. The proposed approach represents a culmination of action-orientated and critically reflective experiences over time, and is supported by qualitative student feedback that demonstrates how an online pedagogy of care deepens student engagement. The paper provides an initial review of research focusing on online learning that impacts upon a student's engagement, emphasising the student's sense of connection. Noddings' framework of moral education (1992; 1998; 2002; 2010) is then used to ground the online pedagogy of care approach. Within the context of HE, evidence to support the efficacy of this approach in the form of student feedback over time is thus presented to emphasize the link between an online pedagogy of care and transformative student outcomes. Finally, recommendations for future research in online learning in HE are proposed.

Online Learning and Pedagogical Care

The rapid transition to online models of delivery in Higher Education (HE) has vastly changed the tertiary education landscape. While originally developed to support face-to-face learning, and not replace it (Newhouse, 2016), an increasing range of tertiary courses are now delivered to students without any requirements for on-campus instruction, with this mode of delivery now a preferred option for many students (Allen, Wright, & Innes, 2014; Dell, Low & Wilker, 2010). The ability to gain a tertiary qualification without having to attend a traditional university campus has demonstrated benefits for many, particularly with respect to widening participation in HE (Wallace, 2003). Students who were once unable or unlikely to access HE now have much stronger representation. This includes those living in non-urban areas, first in family to study in HE, learners with a disability, students from culturally diverse backgrounds, and those who are mature aged,

raising families, or in employment (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Consequently, online students represent much greater diversity than on-campus cohorts (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2016), with online learning promoted as a means to extend educational opportunity to many who may have formerly been disadvantaged (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). Alongside such benefits, however, are concerns about the underpinning rationale for this rapid transition to online learning and the quality of learning it facilitates.

HE now represents a consumer-driven entity, driven by processes of marketisation, reflected in "an adaptation of market terminology activity and even aggression in marketing practices" (Hall, 2018, p. 33). Academics have found themselves under increasing pressure to deliver more instruction online, with many degrees now offered entirely online with no on-campus experiences (Newhouse, 2016). Baker et al. (2016) note that "academic agency appears to have been increasingly eroded as financial imperatives take precedence over Learning and Teaching decision-making" (p. 40). Concerns are repeatedly raised that economic imperative, rather than benefits to learning are the true rationale for this rapid transition (Dell et al., 2010). Further, the "facelessness" and lack of "personhood" in online learning environments has been identified as isolating and challenging for many students (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Rose, 2017). These concerns are compounded by research that indicates that online students have lower retention rates (Bettinger and Loeb, 2017), and tend to be less interactive institutionally and with other students (AITSL, 2016). Thus, while online learning may open educational opportunities, such an approach may equally lead to educational disadvantage (Fox, 2018). Nonetheless, while there is widespread concern over the ways that forces of marketization are at work in driving the online agenda, it is clear that online learning is a permanent fixture in the HE landscape (Hall, 2018; Kentnor, 2015). As such, better understanding of how to facilitate this learning in a manner that promotes student success is paramount.

The value of care in online learning

Nell Noddings' (1992; 1998; 2005; 2010) seminal work into the centrality of care in effective teaching and learning is based upon the position that care is basic to human relationships; that all people desire to be cared for, and that care is an educational goal and vital element of the educational process. The notion that "a good teacher is a caring teacher" is widely held across a range of educational settings. Clegg & Rowland focuses on the role of kindness, which we recognise as an outworking of pedagogical care, highlighting how this is often equated with good teaching, yet simultaneously remains "unremarked and under threat in the contemporary conditions of higher education" (Clegg & Rowland, 2010, p. 720), potentially because kindness suggests sentimentalism and lack of rigour. And yet, evidence highlights the significant impact care (and kindness) can have upon student learning and success. Busteed's (2015) research exploring the learning experiences of university students and later life success highlights the positive impact of pedagogical care on learning and on the student's life beyond their studies. His findings emphasise the importance of emotional support during a student's studies, and the educator's care for their students. Busteed (2019) writes, "In all of the education research I've been involved with, transcendent outcomes are derived from an emotional engagement in learning, rather than by simply acquiring knowledge" (para 5). He concludes that student learning success is most significantly related to emotional attachment throughout the learning process.

Clouston (2016) similarly emphasises the transformative impacts of caring as a reciprocal process between students and educators within HE. Such findings align with Noddings' contributions exploring pedagogical care.

While the work of Noddings, Busteed and others (Rivera Munoz, Baik & Lodge, 2019; McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006) are derived from face-to-face learning contexts, we argue that intentional engagement in care-focused teaching for online students is paramount. As previously explored, online study potentially precipitates new dimensions of isolation and disempowerment, contributing to students' perceptions of being "faceless" (Rose, 2017). Given that care is exercised best within relationships (Noddings, 2010), it is inevitable that the exercise of care in online contexts poses a greater challenge (Cramp & Lamond, 2016; Rose & Adams, 2014) requiring an intentional approach from online academics. While studies exploring the application of pedagogical care online exist, these tend to focus on the student perspective, and thus, insight into pedagogical care specifically from the instructor's perspective is limited. The work of Rose and Adams (2014) provides an early insight into the educator perspective, although tends to focus particularly on the facelessness of the online learning process, and on the difficulties experienced by educators in light of the relentlessness of constant access. Rose and Adams ultimately question whether educational technologies and HE systems can ever actually accommodate pedagogical caring. Cramp & Lamond's (2016) investigation into the design of a kindness-centred online course (referred to as "digitally-mediated learning") identified that persistent student engagement, guided by qualities of kindness, offered an effective pedagogical approach for online learners. However, they nonetheless concluded that such approaches remain on the fringes of mainstream pedagogy owing to the additional time and costs such approaches required. Given that online learning is very much "here to stay" (Hall, 2018; Kentnor, 2015), we thus contend that it is imperative to both understand the complexities and limitations of online learning contexts and to develop and implement an intentional approach to pedagogical care to accommodate the growing number of online students internationally. As such, this paper provides an important contribution to understanding the implementation and effectiveness of intentionally positioning a pedagogy of care in online learning in HE.

Method

The purpose of this study was to highlight the characteristics and impacts of what we propose as an *online pedagogy of care*. We have both facilitated online learning experiences within HE since 2006. The first author, Katie, has worked for the past 14 years within a School of Education in an Australian regional university that comprises a large proportion of online students. Her primary teaching focus is creative arts education in Initial Teacher Education in Early Childhood and Primary Education degrees, typically centred on arts curriculum and pedagogy. The second author, Stephen, has been working in an Australian multi-campus university in an urban setting for the past 18 years in a school of Human Services and Social Work. His areas of discipline expertise are counselling psychology and professional ethics as it applies to human services practice. Online units of study he has facilitated online include 'Basic Personal Counselling' and 'Ethics and Professional Practice'. We have been recognised formally for our approaches to teaching and learning in HE via a range of university teaching awards, with Katie receiving multiple

awards for online pedagogy, and Stephen receiving National recognition for his work in Australian Higher Education.

In order to cultivate a clearer insight into the specific elements of our pedagogical approach and its impacts upon online student experiences, a process of thematic analysis of a range of data collected over time was undertaken. We were guided by the research question: "In what way is care enacted in our online courses, and how does this enhance the student experience?" Longitudinal student data, which included qualitative feedback through course evaluation of teaching surveys and unsolicited email correspondence, were collected from a twelve-year period (2013 – 2019). These data provided insights into the student experience over time, helping to identify elements of our pedagogical approaches that were effective in cultivating care-centred online learning environments. We additionally met over a number of years (2017 – 2020) to engage in a process of dialogic reflection on our online teaching and learning to articulate and make explicit our respective approaches to pedagogical care. This analytic process yielded a deeper understanding of the interactive dimensions between the educator and learner that promote transformative engagement, and assisted in clarifying aspects of our teaching practice that contribute to the enactment of are. Full ethical clearance for the research was obtained through the lead author's institutional ethics body.

Importantly, we recognised the need for researcher reflexivity when engaged in researching and reflecting upon our own teaching practice. Importantly, McDougall (2004) notes that reflexivity can be a resource more than a form or bias if we can "foreground how we construct research and subject ourselves as researchers to critical self-scrutiny" (p. 34). Similarly, Hatch asserts that "The capacities to be reflexive, to keep track of one's influence on a setting, to bracket one's biases, and to monitor one's emotional responses are the same capacities that allow researchers to get close enough to human action to understand what is going on" (p. 10). As such, we engaged in the analytic process with a dimension of self-awareness and an ongoing review of our assumptions and perceptions through dialogic reflection, while equally valuing the rich and intimate insights we both had into our own teaching practices in order to reveal key insights that may help to articulate our views on pedagogical caring. The process of cycling back and forth between "insider knowledge" and "external" student feedback was then reflexively engaged with via dialogic reflection, helping to generate supportable connections between our experience and that of our students.

Noddings' Framework of Moral Education

As stated earlier, we contend that an online pedagogy of care is most effectively situated within Noddings' (2010) Framework of Moral Education. This framework was deemed appropriate for the study as it provided a cogent lens through which the reflective inquiry could be understood. This framework was influenced by the work of Carol Gilligan, Virginia Held and Martin Buber (Gilligan, 1993; Held, 2006; Buber, 1958) and is underpinned by an ethic of care emphasizing an orientation to working with individuals within educational contexts, centered in caring relationships. The framework thus offers an approach to working with individuals that is caring in intent and that promotes transformative learning.

The framework comprises four components: Modelling, Dialogue, Practice and Confirmation. The components are '...activated within, and depend for their success, on the establishment of caring relations' (Noddings, 2010, p. 147). The first component, 'modelling', recognises that the educator can demonstrate through their own behaviour what caring in action means. This is a form of "pedagogical care" where the educator is invested in the holistic growth of their students, and attempts to elevate student understanding above "knowing about" the various domains of learning, to genuinely caring about their own learning as an integral element of growth. Noddings writes, "we do not tell our students to care; we show them how to care by creating caring relations with them" (1992, p. 228). The establishment of these caring relations is the bedrock of all dimensions of the framework.

According to the second component, 'dialogue', the educator intentionally engages the students in open-ended and genuine dialogue centered in caring. Such dialogue does not have pre-determined outcomes, and is a genuine "search for understanding, empathy or appreciation… playful, serious, logical or imaginative, goal or process oriented… [and] always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning" (1992, p.228). Such dialogue allows the educator to model caring in action. It equally should involve opportunities to explicitly discuss caring in relation to the individual's learning, fostering learning appreciation in the wider context of their individual lives and interests.

The third component, 'practice,' gives opportunity for the individual learner to practice caring in a supportive environment. A central tenet of the teacher's engagement with this component is to provide timely feedback to recognise and affirm a demonstrated caring response from the individual learner or to supportively highlight any responses that do not serve to promote caring within the learning environment. Noddings (2010) emphasises that the component of 'practice' does not involve the teacher rewarding an individual's act of caring; it merely acknowledges the act to cultivate an intrinsically motivated caring response that may transform the individual's ethical framework.

The final component, 'confirmation', inspired by the work of Buber (1958) gives emphasis to encouraging the individual towards self-betterment (Noddings, 2010). This can be fostered by the teacher finding opportunity to provide specific feedback about the individual's caring responses, including the effects of such responses on others. Moreover, we extend upon this to include notions of pedagogical inspiration that focuses on generating inner-motivation within each student, encouraging them to continue their own ongoing relationship with the focus of their learning. As highlighted earlier, Noddings (2010) stresses that 'confirmation' can only occur within the context of a caring relationship cultivated between the teacher and student.

Data in the form of our student evaluation measures, feedback via unsolicited emails and dialogic and reflective interaction were collated in early 2020. The process of analysis commenced with the thematic organisation of student qualitative data and researcher reflections utilising the four components of Noddings' framework: Modelling, Dialogue, Practice and Confirmation. This then provided a scaffold for more focused reflections, centred on each component of the framework, with an explicit articulation of key elements that we had engaged in when enacting pedagogical

care that were highlighted by students repeatedly through their feedback. The following section presents the results of the study.

Results

Modelling

The data highlighted student feedback sources that linked to the first component of modelling. As mentioned in an earlier section, within the context of this study 'modelling' refers to the educator engaging in teaching approaches that are centred in an ethic of care. In alignment with Noddings (1992; 1998; 2002; 2010), we assert that an online pedagogy of care begins with *relationships*. However, this has been shown to be more challenging online where educators are "removed" from the students not only by space, but also often by time, particularly when some students engage solely (or extensively) asynchronously. 'Modelling' care thus becomes central to the establishment of a caring online culture within courses. By foregrounding the modelling of care as a pedagogical approach, the educator creates an environment in which every student feels respected and valued. Specific strategies that we have adopted and implemented are as follows:

Modelling care through intentionally person-centred online interaction: Pedagogical caring is modeled to students through a personable learning environment, founded on genuine, warm interactions (synchronous and asynchronous) where students can gain a sense of the educator's personality. When a positive personal tone imbues all written and spoken communications, where the educator conveys their 'personhood' and invites students to do the same, this models open and caring communication for students, which hooks (1994) (the author deliberately eschews the capitalisation of her name) affirms as essential if students are expected to "open up".

In reflective dialogue, we discussed the specific ways we model caring to our learners and why these strategies are considered important. We shared a specific focus on helping our students to gain a sense of our personality in our courses, and in the cultivation of a welcoming learning environment in which they can bring their 'whole self'. We see the course platform not simply as a space to engage in learning, but one in which it is enjoyable to interact, and which acknowledges the students' wider lives. We take an intentional approach to written communication that maintains a light-hearted and welcoming tone. Our forums provide focused discussion and invite personal storytelling; and weekly messages to students focus on inclusive, warm and positive language. As part of our practice frameworks we intentionally state in our welcome to online students that we remain committed to working collaboratively as co-learners. We articulate that our interaction is founded in mutually respectful communication grounded in the values of care and compassion. We use personal stories to illustrate concepts relating to our own practices as educators and practitioners, emphasising the importance of a practice framework that is grounded in an ethic of care (2019).

Student feedback affirmed that the person-centred online interactions made them feel cared for, as outlined below:

… an engaging and personable lecturer who cares about her students' learning. (SET 2018)

...It was lovely to see your passion, caring and be able to connect even through this impersonal online medium...I have learnt so much… (student email, 2019)

...I just wanted to send you an email to thank you very much for all your wonderful and generous support...You certainly helped me be a better worker and better person to see the world in a more humane way. (student email, 2015)

Exercising immediacy and responsiveness: It is well documented that a critical consideration for educators when developing a sense of connection for online students is to develop and maintain a strong online presence (Bowers & Kumar, 2915). Facilitating timely, supportive responses to students using a range of online communication approaches conveys a sense of individuals being valuable members of the learning community. We discussed the importance of being present for students, which we see as critical within the online space. At the commencement of our courses we clearly delineate how students can stay connected with us (email, phone consultation, web-based interfaces) and verbally commit to timely responses. As part of this process we delineate reasonable boundaries so that student expectations are grounded in the realities of our own limitations (weekends quarantined for personal time, limited outside work hours contact etc.). To this end, we both ensure that email contact is responded to in a timely manner. We negotiate phone consultation or web-based video call options so that students can talk in-person. We ensure that our interactions are grounded in a compassionate and supportive orientation.

The following student responses highlight this approach as it applies to our experiences in facilitating a sense of immediacy and responsiveness.

Katie was outstanding at providing patient and extensive support for students throughout the course. She went out of her way to ensure students' questions were answered promptly and in detail. (SET, 2019)

I would like to thank Katie … for her support throughout the course. She kept me informed especially if there were any changes or postponements. She was prompt in replying to emails and providing timely advice. (SET, 2016)

Stephen's enthusiasm...knowledge…[and] his approachability and friendliness made asking questions less scary. His response rate to emails was great (SET, 2019).

You have a very unique ability to stay engaged but also making each student feel valued and as if you are truly interested in each of us individually (student email, 2018).

Demonstrating compassion: An online pedagogy of care must be orientated towards a compassionate, student-centred approach, acknowledging the complexities of students' lives and providing responses that support student learning. Such responses may include offers of additional phone or video-link consultations, extensions for assessment, awareness that online

learners will approach their learning with greater flexibility, and assisting in tailoring study approaches for students with unique learning needs. These offers are made available to all students, with an open invitation to stay in contact with us regarding their specific learning needs, ensuring that all students are aware of the support available to them.

We naturally gravitate towards a position of exercising kindness and compassion. Our practice frameworks are grounded in a humanistic orientation that conceptualises all people as valuable. In our teaching work we model compassionate interaction through the various modes of course communication. We state up front that our values guide us to work from a compassionate and kind position and we make a verbal commitment to students to maintain this orientation in the courses we facilitate. Admittedly, this orientation can at times be challenging when working within wider systems in Higher Education: there have been times when compassionate, student-centred care is limited by policy and procedural frameworks that limit the extent of compassion we can apply. In such cases, we have necessarily worked within policy, and attempted to use ongoing compassionate communication to enact what care we could.

The following student responses attest to this commitment in locating compassionate care as central to our interaction:

> *Katie was an amazing support...during one of the most difficult periods in my life, she was a...beacon of light and guidance during a very dark time for me. I cannot say enough about the support she has offered, and her kind words." (SET, 2014)*

> *Special mention of my assigned tutor, Katie...The fact that she simply cared made the world of difference to us. Thanks and well done! (SET, 2013)*

> *…Stephen catered to my hearing impairment...He touched base with me...to make sure he was doing everything he could for me and my learning...I felt very supported...he made me feel extremely prepared for every assessment piece (SET, 2018)*

> *...thank you Stephen for the care and support you have shown me when my mother was very sick...Your understanding and empathy helped me navigate through the assessments and the extension was most appreciated. (student email, 2018)*

Dialogue

A range of data sources highlighted that the second component of Noddings' (2010) framework, 'dialogue', was an important dimension of an online pedagogy of care. While we acknowledge that dialogue is central to the practice of most online educators, a care-centric online teaching model approaches dialogue as a care-centred pedagogical strategy. Further, online dialogue can be more challenging than face-to-face contexts: non-verbal cues, eye-contact and informal conversation, helpful in forming a sense of trust and belonging, are not as readily part of online discussion. Thus, a care-centred online educator needs to enact intentional strategies to facilitate and nurture dialogue that contributes to their overall online pedagogy of care. To this end, we implemented the following strategies:

Dialogical orientation: The cultivation of a learning environment designed to foster an interactive community of caring learners will explicitly value multiple perspectives, and therefore intentionally provide opportunities for open-ended dialogue, in which individual learners understand that their diverse perspectives are valued, and where they can express something of their unique self in the context of their learning. Caring dialogue in online contexts requires opportunity for students to engage in meaningful discussion through multiple modes, synchronously and asynchronously.

In our respective disciplines, dialogical interaction that acknowledges a range of learner contributions is a central element of practice. We encourage dialogue within our online communities through various mediums. Synchronous tutorials provide for all learners, even those reticent to speak using their microphone, through interactive activities including typed chat, small group discussions, and use of live editable documents for group work. Such strategies encourage all learners to actively engage. Asynchronous discussions via forums, wiki activities and Google Docs permit learners to interact, regardless of their availability for live tutorials, are intentionally open-ended in nature, and focus on insight into multiple perspectives. Any facilitated dialogue is based on a set of clear agreed-upon parameters so that all online community members experience a sense of safety and support (e.g. communicating respectfully, being open to diverse viewpoints, suspending judgement, remaining genuinely curious etc.).

The following student statements emphasise the effectiveness of this dialogical orientation:

> *I have enjoyed the interactive nature of the course, and the fact that there is always someone to have a discussion with (SET, 2018)*

> *Experiencing a collaborative inquiry with others... helped to encourage me to develop a deeper thinking about the subject matter and be challenged to provide evidence of ideas which I supported. (SET, 2016)*

> *The course had a real sense of 'community' which was really great! (SET 2016)*

> *I really...appreciate the effort you make to stay in contact with everyone and ensure everybody understands information and the reasons for needing to know it...I feel this is a rare quality to have and you definitely have it. (student email, 2015)*

Respectful communication: Expectations around effective communication are both modelled (explored above) and explicitly expressed to students at the commencement of, and throughout the course of study. This is fundamental to ensuring a culture of respect and mutual care is established and maintained. We aim to interact with all students in a way that communicates respect and inclusivity. These are non-negotiable conditions for our practice. We both argue that this should be a mandatory position for anyone who is serious about working with individuals within education or the broader human services field. At times, this may include gentle reminders to students regarding their own communication methods if these are less than satisfactory. However, this is done in a manner that promotes relationship and future growth.

The following student feedback support the author's respectful and supportive approach:

I really enjoyed the course, your tutorials and your personal support throughout the semester. When students feel like their lecturer cares about them it really makes a difference and no doubt encourages students to try even harder. (student email, 2019)

...He shared personal anecdotes purposefully as appropriate to enhance our learning and further illustrate concepts. I felt he displayed great self-awareness and boundaries in this area in terms of knowing what and how much to share and when this was appropriate… (SET, 2019).

...he is only one of a minority who treats every single student with respect and kindness, who treats students as equals and not inferiors...Can he teach every subject? (SET, 2019).

Practice

The data demonstrated that students appreciated opportunities to engage in authentic and applied learning experiences within a safe and supportive learning environment. Noddings (1998) argues that the experiences in which we immerse ourselves tend to produce a 'mentality': "If we want to produce people who will care for another, then it makes sense to give students practice in caring and reflection on that practice" (p. 191). While Noddings is referring here to providing opportunities to practice caring in a more general sense, pedagogically, this extends to developing opportunities for learners to engage in practical experiences that build capacity to care about their learning, which we argue will lead to more transformative outcomes. Strategies we employed to engage in 'practice' include:

Emphasising the transformative impacts of learning: The modeling of care goes beyond highlighting a student's value, and aims to establish a learning culture where students are inspired to develop genuine care for their own learning, and awareness of how this relates to, and positively impacts, their wider lives. Thus, intentionally building opportunities to guide students toward developing their own care for course content is facilitated through practical-based learning experiences, and intentional focus on the transformative impacts of learning through dialogue.

Our respective disciplines are practice-based. We therefore have the opportunity to integrate curriculum centred on skills development. For arts education students Katie makes praxis-based learning a priority, going beyond talking "about" education in action to engaging in active learning, facilitated through online tutorials and praxis-oriented assessment. For human services students, Stephen provides guided instruction to support development of counselling skills through a companioning process (students find a companion to work through facilitated exercises to build mastery of interpersonal skills central to the helping professions). We work across our respective teaching periods, closely monitoring student progress through one to one and group-based online interaction. We also offer individual consultation to further support students. Finally, we emphasise how these skills are critical to future practice and need to be seen as valuable to the students as emerging practitioners.

The following student accounts support this orientation:

Teaching in this course is very hands on and I have not felt alone or like I don't know what I am doing, once. (SET, 2018)

The practical, enjoyable and informative assessment items were very useful for expanding teacher knowledge and skills." (SET 2018)

His active, clear and respectful approach motivated me to do well. I didn't feel the pressure to do well because I was obligated to, but because I was motivated at every step of the way (SET, 2019).

Fostering mutual interaction through creative use of online technologies: Interactive online technologies have vastly improved capacity for online educators to engage learners in interactive, practice-centred learning opportunities. Central to our practice is a focus on practical learning activities that allow learners to "workshop" their content knowledge and skills through interactive technologies including discussion boards, synchronous tutorials, educator-facilitated group work, and interaction in shared online documents (such as Google Docs). However, the key dimension of the success of these strategies is the cultivation of care in all interactions. This is also the case for the course content through the foundations of a caring culture, which includes opportunities for companioning and/or social interaction among students.

We both utilize online innovations that support and motivate student learning. Experimenting with and implementing new strategies using emerging technologies is admittedly often time-consuming, and we have both found our current workload models and level of university support do not always adequately reflect the time that we commit when enacting pedagogical care. Stephen applies a companioning process encouraging students to work collaboratively with a 'critical friend' who supports the student as they work through practice based exercises across the teaching period. Students are orientated to the process and are provided with online resources to guide them through the process. Katie works with students to support interactions through initiatives such as "study buddies" (pairing students for unofficial mutual support), "Speed meet" - social speed-dating at the start of semester to socially connect the cohort, and weekly opportunities in forums and tutorials to share personal responses to the coursework.

The following student statements highlight the impacts of our utilisation of learning technologies:

...I looked forward to her [live tutorials] every week. She helped us online students by giving us time to make connections with each other. (SET, 2019)

I just wanted to thank you for all the support over Trimester 2. I enjoyed this course immensely. You make online learning fun and bring a human touch to it (student email, 2019).

Confirmation

The final component, 'confirmation', encourages the individual towards self-betterment (Noddings, 2010). This can be fostered by the teacher finding opportunity to provide feedback about the individual's caring responses, including their effects on others. As highlighted earlier, Noddings (2010) stresses that 'confirmation' can only occur within the context of a caring relationship between the teacher and student.

Immediate and purposeful feedback:

We employ feedback mechanisms delivered in a timely manner to provide purposeful, supportive reflections relating to a student's engagement. Such mechanisms shift the focus away from dominant modes of feedback delivery centred on objective measures of learning outcomes. This orientation includes provision of personalised feedback that highlights transformative dimensions of a student's learning journey. The following statements highlight the significance of such forms of feedback:

> *...Katie appeared very invested in checking in and trying to keep everyone on task, but in such a gentle and friendly manner…' (SET, 2018).*

> *Even though this was an online subject...Stephen endeavoured to touch base with students as a cohort on a regular basis. Displayed genuine interest and added personal experience and relevant issues to look into (SET, 2019).*

"Passing on the baton":

We both employ teaching and communication techniques that inspire students in their journeys as emerging practitioners. We seek to "light fires" that motivate students to see their learning trajectory as a journey into transformative practice. We model passion in our teaching approach through our respectful and supportive communication. This is achieved through the sharing of stories about our own personal journeys as practitioners, the active interrogation of our own framework of practice, including how such frameworks influence the daily decisions that practitioners encounter, and drawing on the practice-wisdom of practitioners in the field.

We are both naturally encouraging and affirming individuals so this component of our orientation to online care seems second nature to us. However, we are mindful of the need to be checking in with ourselves to ensure there are no impediments to encouraging students to become self-actualised individuals. There are many occasions where our work in HE can become stressful and overwhelming. At these moments we are committed to practicing self-care and centering our priorities (including living out our values) so that we can remain aligned with our value positions, respond affirmingly and pass on the baton of passion for education/human services work.

The following feedback emphasises the transformative dimensions of inspiring students towards life-long learning and best practice:

> *...Just want to say what you have done with me in this subject is unbelievable. You have not only taught me the subject but you have changed the way I will view education and*

the way I will educate my children in respect to order of importance for this point forward. (student email, 2017)

...I wanted to let you know how refreshing it was to receive knowledge from someone like yourself...you mean what you say, and say what you mean and do it with integrity. (student email, 2018)

Stephen has taught me in three courses across my degree...his teaching style has always been so engaging, you can really tell he cares about his work and his students (SET, 2018).

Discussion

The results of this study confirm the significance of adopting a pedagogy of care for online teaching. Further, Noddings' framework provides a cogent model to guide the practice of online educators working in HE. Student feedback data clearly indicates that the first component of the framework, 'modelling', is critical to fostering an inclusive and culturally-safe online environment where students experience a sense of care. As we maintain an orientation to caring through person-centred online interaction, students are able to develop understanding of behaviours that cultivate a dynamic of care. Further, a secondary outcome that enhances the focus on caring is the students' shared sense of connection with the authentic personhood of the educator. This outcome is consistent with hooks (1994; 2003) and Palmer (1998), who maintain the significance of students experiencing the educator as a real person, which cultivates a sense of connection and encourages deeper learner engagement. The commitment to ensuring that interactions are valued through the offering of timely responses to individual and group based communication cultivates a sense that individual voices and collective positions are 'heard' and given legitimacy. The demonstration of educator-led compassionate communication reinforces an underpinning value of caring that has the potential to become socially contagious.

Another significant finding illuminates the critical component of Noddings' framework centering on the role of dialogue in fostering an online environment where individuals experience a sense of being cared for. Central to our practices as educators is the facilitation of respectful communication. Our communication within the online space through the use of various technologies is undergirded by a deep respect for all individuals regardless of their background. Communication strategies are tailored to learning activities and/or personal exchanges with students that honour individual personhood. Qualitative student feedback emphasises that students experience a keen sense of being valued and respected by each author with respectful communication practices being central to this outcome. The overarching dialogical orientation inherent in the authors' practice with online students generates a sense of community and solidarity promoting a foundation of caring. Student comments across a range of online offerings over time highlight the experience of a widening sense of participation as individuals and groups are encouraged to share their experiences of learning with one another. Rose & Adams (2014) and Stone & O'Shea (2019) support such an orientation in building community within the online teaching space.

Noddings' component of 'practice' is also identified as an important factor in facilitating an environment of care where students are able to demonstrate and model caring behaviours with their educators and with each other. The findings of the study confirm the links between the use of online strategies that foster mutual interaction with the promotion of an environment that is caring in orientation. The data derived from our reflections of facilitating strategies such as discussion forums, synchronous tutorials and collaborative group-based exercises reveals that engagement in these activities facilitate opportunity for students to practice interacting with one another. Moreover, when conducted in a way that is consistent with the values of caring, these generate additional opportunities to cultivate care. It is important to note that we are intentional in establishing conditions for each activity that serves to promote an environment of mutual respect and compassionate caring to ensure that students understand that such an environment is central to the learning space.

Finally, 'confirmation' as the fourth component of Noddings' framework is instrumental in encouraging students to foster a future practitioner-identity that respects their own and the other's place in the world. Student data associated with our teaching practices over time indicates that the use of timely and purposeful feedback associated with a student's interaction style raises their awareness about the impacts of their communication in either fostering or impeding the development of a caring orientation. Our commitment to fostering a sense of 'passing on the batton' to students as an inherent dimension of supporting them through the student lifecycle is identified as another important factor in launching students as future practitioners who have embedded the value of caring for "the other" as a central tenet of their future work. This outcome aligns with Buber's (1958) 'I' 'Thou' orientation that promotes mutually respectful human interaction.

Conclusion

While the results of this critically reflective inquiry support the utilisation of an online pedagogy of care to promote transformative experiences of learning for students in HE, consideration should be given to the limitations of the study. Although we have had extensive experience working in online learning environments over time, the data utilized for this study is limited to our respective personal experiences in teaching and learning with a specific focus on student feedback. Further, qualitative feedback drawn for the purposes of this inquiry were limited to our unique course offerings in our roles as educators within our respective institutions. The limitations of this shared focus of perspective may limit the generalisability of the findings to other HE contexts, although it is our hope that the principles shared are relevant to wider learning domains, given our belief that the student experience is central to all learning. While we recognise the potentially transformative value of adopting an online pedagogy of care, wider elements of working in HE may impede upon this practice being more generally adopted. Busteed (2015) highlights a sobering point regarding the exercise of care in HE:

> *Sure, it's fair to say that there are any number of highly committed and engaged faculty and staff on every campus who care about students and spend time mentoring and supporting them ... But it's also fair to say that most faculty and staff have no real rewards*

for this work. They are rewarded, however, for their number of publications and the amount of grants and revenue they generate through research. These are not unimportant targets by any means. They serve a real purpose in academia. The problem is that almost all our focus is on these measures - and likely at the cost of having the time and energy for providing more students with emotional support and valuable experiences. (Busteed, 2015)

We contend that future research should be directed towards the facilitation of institution-led, longitudinal studies that give further consideration to the impacts of an online pedagogy of care in promoting engagement to underscore future institutional recognition for the transformative impact of care in online learning.

Declaration of interests statement

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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