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A Care-Centered Approach to Online Learning Design and Pedagogy

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Abstract
Researchers in the field of online learning have raised concerns over its lack of focus on the affective/emotional aspect of the online learning experience, despite a strong research base indicating the important role that emotions play in successful and effective learning (Ch'ng, 2019). Utilizing a phenomenological methodological approach, the researchers interviewed online students and coded transcripts based on Noddings' Ethics of Care Framework (1984) to explore the phenomenon of care in online learning in an effort to bridge this gap and deepen our understanding of the feeling of caring and being cared-for. These findings add to the literature on the role of emotions in online learning as viewed through the lens of care-theory. The findings highlight course design issues and instructor behaviors that promote a climate of care in an online environment from a learner perspective. These findings may be of benefit to inform future teacher preparation programs.

Keywords: care theory, online learning

Introduction

Research using Noddings' Care Theory as a theoretical framework and its relation to the lived experience of learners has not been properly examined and defined, especially in the context of online learning. Caring relationships in learning, learner-centered pedagogy, development of a community of learners, support and trust, and instructor and social presence are closely related areas of research that have been widely explored in the online space (Abrami et al., 2011; Anderson & Simpson, 2004; Garrison, 2007). We adopted the relational nature of care for this study (Noddings, 2008, 2012). Under this view, caring behaviors and attitudes cannot be identified by a single agent out of context, but is rather reciprocal and responsive, meaning that a caring encounter can only be considered as such if the *carer* initiates an encounter in response to the needs of the *cared-for*, and the *cared-for* acknowledges with interest the efforts of the *carer*. While this indicates that caring may be more difficult to examine in a virtual setting, it also points to the need to understand the difference between traditional and face-to-face encounters from a care-centered perspective. Given the virtual nature of the relationship between instructors and students and the lack of in person interactions in an online space, one must be cautious not to assume that what we know about care-centered practices in face-to-face settings apply to online learning experiences; rather, we must understand the differing needs of online learners and how technology affordances can support teachers' efforts in engaging online learners in caring relations (Robinson, et al., 2017; Velasquez et al., 2013). This phenomenological study is our attempt to fill this gap by exploring what it means to be cared-for, and what course design elements and instructor behaviors contribute to a climate of care in an online learning environment from a learner perspective. The findings are of importance for the design of online programs, particularly in guiding program designers of teacher preparation programs on pedagogical practices.

Methodology

Using Noddings' (1984) Theory of Relational Care Ethics as a framework, a phenomenological methodological approach was used to explore instructor care in online learning through the student lens, because the focus was on the lived experiences of online students as the entry point to understanding the care phenomenon in this learning space (Moustakas, 1994). According to Noddings (1984), educating from a care-perspective consisted of four elements: (a) *Modeling*, or instructors' genuine demonstration of caring behaviors they expect of their students (e.g., honesty and promptness); (b) *Dialogue*, which refers to a back and forth conversations with the learners with no pre-judgment in an attempt to build relationships, develop norms, reach shared understandings, and invite deeper conversations; (c) *Practice*, or opportunities for students to practice the act of caring with an explicit focus on the act of helping and supporting peers (e.g., collaborative and cooperative learning activities), and finally, (d) *Confirmation*, or the act of supporting the development of a better self by encouraging and affirming the best in others. Three participants were interviewed, and their transcripts were analyzed based on Nodding's four elements model. During this phase, a priori code manual was developed based on Noddings' theoretical framework to guide the interpretation of the data, and chunks of text (indicators) were grouped under each element (Modeling, Dialogue, Practice, and Confirmation) then further categorized to form themes. Researchers utilized process coding to identify strategies and practices to enhance each of Noddings' elements in an online course experience (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Findings

Indicators of all four elements of Noddings framework (i.e., Modeling, Dialogue, Practice, and Confirmation) were present in all three transcripts except for "Practice," which was absent from one interview. The themes that emerged for each of the elements or codes used for this study can be seen Figure 1 as a visual depiction of the themes. Noddings' element of Modeling contained a large number of indicators during the analysis.

Figure 1

A Visual Depiction of the Codes and Emerging Themes
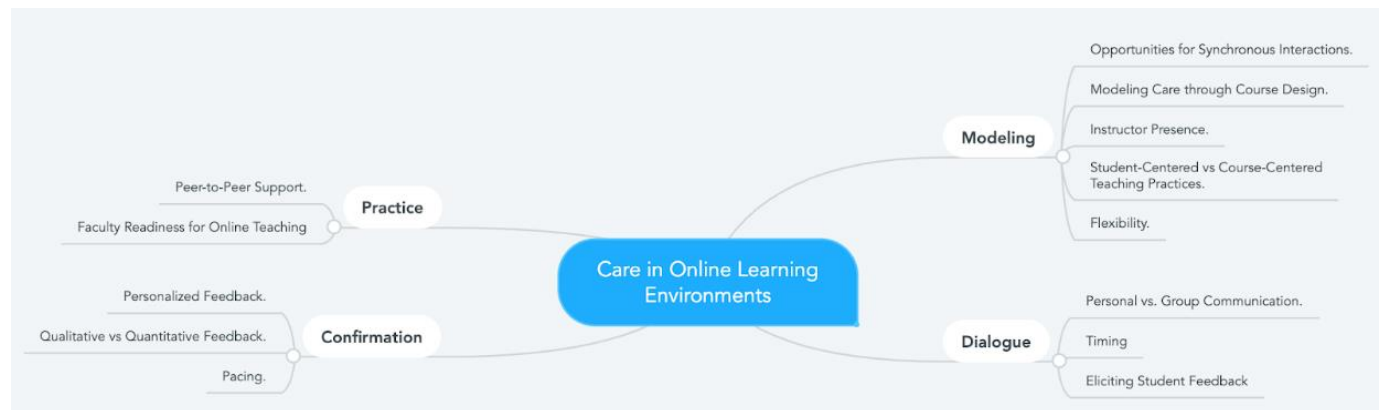
The themes of synchronous learning, course design, and instructor presence that were included under the element of modeling are widely researched in our field, particularly the online learning space. Instructor feedback in the form of personalized versus a blanket statement is important to online students, but it was also explained that the feedback was essential in learner motivation. Further, instructor confirmation through feedback was valued by learners for pacing and continued success in the course. Faculty readiness for online teaching is another theme under the element of practice which participants explained that some of their online instructors were beginners in online teaching and "it is a skill that requires learning, there is a learning curve," according to a participant. Another participant noted a higher level of course interactions from online teachers who held a doctorate or a higher level of education. The themes of this study may be of value when utilized as topics for deeper exploration within a teacher preparation program using a care-centered pedagogy.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study adds to the literature on defining care in online learning as viewed through the lens of care-theory. Establishing a climate of care, whether in traditional or online learning settings, leads to a learning experience that is responsive to the needs of all learners. The findings bring to light some of the factors that are more relevant in establishing and maintaining caring relations in online learning context from a learner perspective. The theme of faculty readiness for online teaching highlights that care-centered pedagogical practices, if included in teacher preparation programs, would allow teachers to practice and refine their skills in competencies in online care-centered practices. Caring is a social process that is learned and therefore, can be taught (Crigger, 2001). Implications of these findings for online instruction and pedagogy as well

as the design and development of teacher preparation programs are drivers for future research and discussion.

Author's Contributions

HR conceived and designed research and performed interviews. HR, MA, WK analyzed data and interpreted results; drafted manuscript; edited revised manuscript; and approved final version of manuscript.

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Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the researchers' University.

Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The interviews and data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethics requirement. They are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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