

Examining Ethics of Care in Our Online Discourse with Students

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Abstract

Ethics of care has long been a topic of interest in educational environments and academic relationships, as student success and motivation can be linked to these dynamics (Komarraju et al., 2010; Pascarella, 1980; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Ethics of care encompasses empathy, respect, dialogue, and putting the needs of others before your own (Beck & Cassidy, 2009; Noddings, 1995). Too often, faculty focus on the academic rigor and high expectations of students, yet less attention is placed on the social-emotional support that college students need, particularly from diverse backgrounds (Nieto, 2008).

As technology integration increases in higher education institutions, so does the amount of online communication between instructors and students. Computer-mediated discourse analysis allows faculty to reflect on their communication with students and the larger impacts it has on learning. The purpose of examining online discourse for ethics of care is to understand the ways in which faculty can employ ethics of care toward students in day-to-day communication, using those interactions as a space for building caring faculty-student relationships. Because care is not universally defined, we must understand its nuances so that we can develop awareness around how language may be interpreted by students. Online communication (also referred to as computer-mediated discourse, or CMD) lacks many of the contextual and physical cues that exist in face-to-face communication, however, "there is ample evidence that users compensate textually for missing auditory and gestural cues, and that CMD can be richly expressive" (Herring, 2003, p. 614).

Using critical discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005; van Dijk, 2008) and computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2005) as conceptual and theoretical frameworks and conducting a thorough literature review, a self-analysis of discourse was conducted based on one semester of emails to students. Themes of care were analyzed and presented as a framework for future computer-mediated discourse analysis of faculty discourse within email and the LMS, as well as other forms of online communication. Helping faculty foster the ability to reflect on their language use and interactions with students will result in more opportunities to use online communication as a tool for building caring relationships with students.

Keywords: ethics of care, discourse analysis, faculty student relationships