Reconceptualising 'caring' in e-tutor-student interactions during the Covid-19 pandemic in an ODeL university in South Africa

Thembeka Shange
University of South Africa
Corresponding Author: ezengetc@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

In South Africa and elsewhere, the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 and the lockdown regulations forced both academics and students to adapt to a new reality of fully online modules and assessments. This catapulted relations in higher education into the spotlight. The concern of this paper is how e-tutors in an Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) university in South Africa have enacted care in online interaction with the students during this period. Available research focuses on online interaction; however, there is a paucity when it comes to care cultivated by e-tutors on students to increase online interactions during the covid-19 pandemic. Through the lens of Relational Care, this paper seeks to reconceptualise care during e-tutor-student interaction in one of the English modules at a mega South African ODeL university. Data were collected through a survey completed by e-tutors (n = 8) and lecturers (n = 4) of one of the English modules at this university. Through content analysis, patterns and categories emanating from the data were extracted. Findings indicated that e-tutors and lecturers had minimal understanding of how to enact care in this environment during the covid-19 pandemic. Future research should focus on how to manage student online interaction in an OdeL environment during crises.

Keywords: e-tutors, interaction, OdeL, Relational Care,

Introduction

Interaction in online learning has been widely researched; however, the problem of a lack of interaction by students remains an unresolved issue. This is echoed by Rose (2017) who asserts that digital platforms for the delivery of online instructions "amputate" teachers' and learners' faces, such that teachers and learners engage with others who are faceless. This seems to be the case concerning the interaction between e-tutors and students of one of the English modules at this Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) university in South Africa where poor interaction between these two entities remains a challenge. E-tutors are regarded as crucial stakeholders in an ODeL environment. It is well-documented in research that both e-tutors and students often feel isolated and neglected in the digital learning environment (Abdullah &

Mtsweni, 2014: Joubert & Snyman, 2017: Mare & Mutezo, 2021). It would be in the interest of both parties to establish how this turned out during the Covid-19 pandemic. Velasquez, et al. (2013) regard the ethics of caring as an essential model for understanding the communication of caring interactions in online learning. The unprecedented Covid-19 situation propelled a shift in lecturer-student engagement online, which required emergency response to address the problem. At the ODeL university where this research was conducted, the most remarkable change was the immediate migration from venue-based to fully online assessment methods. Added to this change was the move from a blended mode to a fully online delivery mode for all the modules at this university. In other words, students could no longer rely on posted learning materials due to lockdown regulations which prohibited the Post Office from delivering parcels to students. There was a sudden need to prepare both students and university staff for this novel mode of assessment within a very short space of time. It is under these circumstances that e-tutors would have been expected to play a major role in increasing student engagement online. In line with the main objective of this paper, the challenge is whether e-tutors were equipped to provide some sort of caring interactions while engaging with the students online.

Theoretical Framework

With the uncertainty that characterises this period of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting anxiety and trauma that learners, teachers, and parents are experiencing, the theme of a pedagogy of care has surfaced within educational institutions (Bozkurt, et al., 2020). Therefore, the framework underpinning this study is the theory of Relational Care Ethics espoused by Noddings (1984) who considers the ethics of care as relational and situated. This is the case in an educational space where e-tutors, lecturers, and students are involved as the carers and the cared-for. This theory was deemed relevant for this study as it sought to unpack how e-tutors cultivated care for their students, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Bergmark and Alerby (2006) opine that caring is a reciprocal act. Additionally, Noddings (1984) contends that people can learn to both give and receive care. In a later publication, she describes the task of caring as follows: Care theory displaces the lonely, principled moral agent at the heart of traditional ethics with a dyadic relation: the " carer" and "cared-for." (Noddings 2016: 85)

The dyadic nature of care theory indicates that ethics of care may not be an easy act to achieve if the relationship between the carer and the cared-for is not properly managed. In the view of Noddings, care theory describes caring encounters and caring relations, and gives us some guidance on how to establish, maintain and enhance such relations (Noddings, 2016). However, she cautions that because of the dyadic nature of care theory, caring cannot be operationalised into a prescriptive list of actions or behaviours (Noddings, 1984). When looking at the relationship between the e-tutors and students in this module, it may be a challenge to establish a commitment over time because this is a semester module where interaction may take place for two to three months due to issues like late appointment of e-tutors and late allocation of students to e-tutoring groups. In a study by Shange (2021), a similar impasse was expressed regarding the relationship between e-tutors and lecturers of this module where Rose (2017 as

cited in Shange 2021) contends that it may be a challenge to form meaningful relationships with 'faceless others' ".

In other recent research, Robinson, et al. (2021) referring to research by Noddings (1984) assert that educating from a care perspective consists of four elements:

(a) *Modelling*, or instructors' genuine demonstration of caring behaviours 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 a shared understanding 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. Regarding e-tutors' and students' interaction in this study, it is of interest to unpack the four elements: modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation.

Modeling

In the view of Noblit (1993: 370), modelling entails the teacher showing herself to her students as one caring, as one who lives her ethics. In the same vein, Noddings (1988: 222) opines that teachers model caring when they steadfastly encourage responsible self-affirmation in their students. In her view, such teachers are concerned with their students' academic achievement as may be expected, but more importantly, they are interested in the development of fully moral persons (Noddings 1988). In the case of e-tutors for this English module at the ODeL university where the research took place, they would be expected to display a caring attitude toward the students who are the cared for. I believe that for this to happen, the e-tutors need to understand how care can be enacted in an OdeL environment.

Dialogue

Bajaj (2016) opines that a basic requirement in caring relations is *dialogue*. He further contends that it is through *dialogue* that we come to know one another, and it is in dialogue that needs are expressed. Without *dialogue*, those who want to care and those who have the best interests of the cared for at heart must work with inferred needs (Noddings, 2002 cited in Bajaj 2016). In his view, the teacher must engage in *dialogue* to identify the needs, motives, and interests of others. In the view of Borzkut, et al. (2020), a key part of a pedagogy of care is listening to students and engaging in open and authentic dialogue. The e-tutors at the OdeL university in South Africa are expected to maintain *dialogue* with their students through the learning management system called myUnisa. In the view of Dela Cruz (2020: 3), in a *dialogue,* the teacher is attuned not just to the response of the one cared for, but more importantly, to his

continued involvement with the subject matter. At this university, the situation concerning e-tutor-student interaction remains a challenge, and this may hinder this *dialogue,* as espoused by researchers like Dela Cruz (2020). Additionally, most of the students studying through this OdeL university come from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds. This sentiment is echoed by Borzkut, et al. (2020) who contend that marginalised and disadvantaged students who are struggling with the compounded effects of inequities that already exist in educational systems because of this sudden pivot to emergency remote education may find it hard to engage in meaningful dialogue with their e-tutors.

Practice

The element of *practice* involves collaborative learning among students, which seems to remain a challenge, as most students lack the self-confidence to engage in collaborative learning spaces. This may be because of the novelty presented by virtual contexts and new ways of communication. Dela Cruz (2020) opines that in *practice,* the teacher develops in the student the skills necessary to become one caring. The period during the Covid-19 pandemic might have caused more panic and anxiety, especially for students who were entering university for the first time, coupled with studying through a distant online mode. Bozkurt et al. (2020) state that due to the pandemic, learners, teachers, and parents were going through a great deal of anxiety.

Confirmation

Noddings (1988: 224) regards this principle as the most important of the four. She says the following about confirmation:

> When we attribute the best possible motive consonant with reality to the cared-for, we confirm him; that is, we reveal to him an attainable image of himself that is lovelier than that manifested in his present acts.

In education, what we reveal to a student about himself as an ethical and intellectual being has the power to nurture the ethical ideal or to destroy it (Noddings 1984 cited in Noddings 1988: 223). It would appear as though there may be a tendency among educators of taking confirmation simplistically. Noddings (1988) suggests that teachers need to know what the student loves, strives for, fears, and hopes for. Additionally, an ideal situation would be when the teacher and student become partners in fostering the student's growth. In a distance learning environment, it may be challenging to know and understand the students' fears and what they love due to the limited interaction that lecturers and e-tutors have with the students in an online learning environment.

Literature review

Research in the field of online learning has highlighted the role played by the emotional aspect of the online learning experience (Robinson, et al., 2021). When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, it

became more urgent that the phenomenon of care in online learning be explored to deepen an understanding of the feeling of caring and being cared for. This view, as espoused by Robinson, et al. (2021), is relevant to understanding how to reconceptualise the phenomenon of care during e-tutor-student interactions in online learning. Some of the available literature on care ethics will be reviewed in this article to provide more insight into caring relationships in online learning.

Definition of care

Some researchers in different disciplines like Psychology and Education have provided useful definitions of care. Mayeroff (1971, cited in Owens & Ennis 2005: 393) opines that to care for other persons is to help them care for themselves. In another vein, caring is also defined as a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realisation, growth, development, protection, empowerment and human community, culture, and possibility (Gordon, et al, 1996 cited in Owens & Ennis, 2005: 393). Additionally, Owens and Ennis (2005) contend that this definition emphasises that caring occurs within relationships. This study seeks to examine the caring in the e-tutor-student relationship in one English module at an ODeL university in South Africa. It is concerning that interaction of students with the e-tutors remains a problem if one considers the definition of care which encompasses relational practices which, among other things, foster mutual recognition and realisation of growth.

Even though academics grappled with the effects of the pandemic on themselves and their families, they also had a duty to continue supporting their students with their studies. As this was an emergency, no one, including the university communities, was prepared for this, let alone the e-tutors who might have been expected to enact care during their online engagements with the students under such anxiety-provoking situations. In the view of Rabin (2021), care ethics in online instruction became particularly relevant as the 2020 pandemic pushed all instruction online.

Care in universities

Some research in care ethics has highlighted controversies and contradictions in terms of caring practices in universities (Bartos, 2021; Grant-Smith & Payne, 2021). These controversies are what Bartos (2021) refers to as the "care revolution". This has, in turn, brought to light concerns about who cares and how (Bartos, 2021). Furthermore, researchers like Grant-Smith and Payne (2021), and Bartos (2021) observed that caring practices are highly contextual and contingent. This means that caring practices for one university may not be the same as in another different university as these contexts may practice caring differently. At face value, the notion of care comes across as a positive connotation, yet some researchers argue that care is not a pure act of goodwill (Robinson, 2011 cited in Bartos, 2021). To illustrate this point, Bartos (2021: 313) is of the view that, on one hand, some universities may be seen to maintain, continue and repair the 'worlds' of its students, staff, and alumnae, while, on the other hand, some may maintain, continue, and repair the worlds of some at the exclusion of others. Additionally, she refers to this as 'fraught caring practices' or 'benign caring practices in the university', Bartos (2021:

312). These terms emphasise the abnormal or ailing nature of caring in some universities. Therefore, it appears as though some researchers, like Robinson (2011) as cited in Bartos (2021), bring forth a different revolutionary angle as she explores underlying power relations inherent in caring relations. In a similar vein, Duncan-Andrade (2009: 182) presents a view that in some cases universities provide ineffective and "hokey programmes" which enable a culture of false caring in which more powerful members of the relationship define themselves as caring even though the recipients of the so-called caring do not perceive it as such. Bartos (2021) opines that false caring practices create false, and even harmful relations. As a solution to this, Grant-Smith and Payne (2021) suggest that universities need to enact deliberate, sustainable, and *care-full* engagement to shape pedagogical practices.

Care at this ODeL university in South Africa

The university under review prides itself on its 11 values, one of which is 'care'. In this context, care is defined as creating an environment in which members of this university community feel understood, respected, and accepted. It is thus expected that an ODeL university should already be well-placed to support students in their online offerings as teaching and learning took place in this mode before the pandemic. However, previous research indicates that lack of student engagement in OdeL remains an unresolved issue as students struggle to deal with 'technology-enabled bombardness' (Rose & Adams, 2014 cited in Shange 2021: 261). One of the e-tutor responsibilities, as stated in the College of Human Sciences (2019) advertisement for e-tutors, is that they are expected 'to provide students with academic and technical support online'. This became more crucial during lockdown when the University had to swiftly move the examinations from venue-based to online assessment, and very little training was provided for this. Consequently, as this was an emergency move, there would not have been an opportunity to prepare the e-tutors for this new type of assessment; yet, they were expected to support students on how to handle online exams. It is also puzzling that while the e-tutors were expected to provide support in line with the new changes under this emergency, these forms of support expected by the university and lecturers of the module were not communicated to the e-tutors. Noddings (2015) opines that for institutions to care adequately, they need to create conditions of care and trust between and among their members at all levels of the hierarchy. In a similar breath, Deacon (2012 cited in Feldman, 2020) asserts that creating a context of care is more pressing in online classes. However, this seems to pose a challenge for lecturers who may struggle with deciding to what extent they can extend themselves to their students' needs beyond the boundaries of normal workday hours (Rose & Adams 2014: 12). A similar situation may likely prevail with the e-tutors at this ODeL university who, in addition to feeling isolated and neglected, may also not be able to create a context of care in online interactions with their students. This may be because they do not know how to do this, or they need to be cared for.

Another challenge for e-tutors at this university is that their level is not well defined in the levels of the hierarchy, as they are regarded as independent contractors. When one considers the situation of e-tutors, external markers, and teacher assistants, one notices that they are at

the lowest level of the hierarchy as they are not regarded as employees of this university. This may often cause a mismatch between the expectations of this group and those of the university community.

Contextualising the research

The name of the module is Academic Language and Literacy in English, which falls within the Applied English Language Studies discipline. In this module, there are about 16 000 registered first-year students who are serviced by about 30 e-tutors, each responsible for 500 students, as well as 8 lecturers and two administrative officers. The purpose of the module is to develop students' ability to do critical reading and critical writing, which are essential academic skills. The module services various academic programmes and qualifications in the university ranging from higher certificates up to a BA degree. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the mode of tuition and assessment was a blended approach. Even though e-learning had been adopted as a policy at this university, there had been a slow move of modules to a fully online delivery mode. While only three modules out of about twenty undergraduate modules in the English Studies department had been converted to fully online, this module under review had not been moved when Covid-19 struck. This meant that e-tutors provided support for the students online through the university Learner Management system, MyUnisa, and the learning materials were available both online as well as through hard copies which were posted to the students' addresses. This had to change suddenly in 2020 when the country was put on hard lockdown, and the posting of learning materials had to stop abruptly when many students had just finalised their registration. Under these circumstances, the students had to depend only on materials posted online, while the e-tutors, just like the lecturers and students, had to forge ahead with teaching and learning under these peculiar circumstances without any prior preparation. To deal with this new mode of delivery, all these groups needed to have access to reliable technology including data. As a leader of this module myself at that time, some of the team members could not function as they either had limited connectivity or none. In the view of Corbera, et al. (2020), Covid-19 might have exposed inequities in confinement, thus making it difficult for students, lecturers, and e-tutors to perform their responsibilities in unusual workspaces during the lockdown. They further highlight other challenges faced by both students and other university members like giving attention or home schooling to their children while juggling that with e-tutoring or studying (Corbera, et al., 2020). Some care ethics researchers opine that care needs to be reciprocal and that there must be a dialogue between the carer and the cared-for. This raises the question of whether it would be possible for this to happen in circumstances where the people involved are grappling with the effects of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown.

Methodology

The objective of the study was to describe and explore how e-tutors have enacted caring interactions online during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following research questions guided the study: How have e-tutors enacted caring interactions online during the Covid-19 pandemic?

What is the e-tutors' understanding of care ethics in online relationships in an ODeL institution during the Covid-19 pandemic?

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the research questions on relational care ethics between e-tutors and students. This research approach was preferred as the relevant method because it sought to interpret the e-tutors' interpretation of care ethics, as they interacted with the students. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) state that qualitative research studies things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. On another similar view, Creswell and Creswell (2018: 41) explain qualitative research as an approach geared to exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This fits in with the study's intention to explore the e-tutors' understanding of relational care ethics in their interaction with the students of the English module.

The invitation to complete the survey questions that were sent by email to the e-tutors and lecturers included an informed consent procedure as approved by the College Research Ethics Committee of the university where the study was conducted. E-tutors who were participants in the study answered the questions in what is marked as Appendix A while lecturer questions appear as Appendix B. The participants' demographic information includes gender, age range, and the number of years tutoring or teaching the module. The survey was used to collect data on how the e-tutors enacted care on the students while they interacted with them online, as well as the e-tutors' and lecturers' understanding of relational care ethics.

A total of 8 out of 26 e-tutors and 4 module lecturers completed the survey which had been posted on the university's Learner Management System (LMS). Their profiles appear in Tables 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1 E-tutor profiles (n = 8)

Respondents' labels	Gender	Age range	Number of years as an e-tutor
ETm1	M	>36	1
ETm2	M	32-36	5
ETm3	M	32-36	4
ETf1	F	>36	6
ETf2	F	>36	1
ETf3	F	32-36	6
ETf4	F	32-36	7
ETf5	F	>36	8

Table 2 Lecturer profiles (n = 4)

Respondents' labels	Gender	Age range	Number of years as Lecturer
Lf1	F	>36	4
Lf2	F	>50	2
Lm1	M	>36	6
Lm2	F	>50	10

The participants were purposefully selected as they were linked to this module during the semester when the research took place. An online survey was one of the options available, as the country was still on lockdown, and I was not able to conduct face-to-face interviews with the e-tutors and lecturers. To further understand caring relationships during Covid-19 in this module I also analysed two main channels of communication from module lecturers which are Tutorial Letter 101(TL101), as well as the welcome page on the LMS. The TL 101 document contains important information about the module outcomes, lecturers' contact details, the assessment plan, available student support, and library resources. The welcome page is a more interactive communication channel that the students access online, and it provides them with an opportunity to interact with their lecturers and other students when they navigate through their module site. This was done to understand how lecturers used these channels to interact with the students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data analysis

In this study, conventional content analysis was used to derive coding categories directly from the text data. This method was preferred because researchers regard it as a flexible method for analysing text data (Cavanagh, 1997 cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1277). Member checks were conducted before and after data analysis to preserve the accuracy of participant responses. Peer debriefings with two senior members of staff in the module were useful in developing the survey protocol, as well as in revising data collection and analysis methods. Obtaining information from three different sources helped to strengthen evidence of the themes. This was done to ensure that the themes that emerged were an accurate reflection of the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I systematically classified the process of coding and identifying themes and patterns as they emerged from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005:1278). This helped me to interpret the data from the e-tutors' and lecturers' comments, and from the two documents that I analysed, to determine their understanding of relational care ethics.

Limitations

Like all other studies, this research has limitations. Sometimes the limitations may have a negative effect on the outcome of the research. In the view of Lincoln and Guba (1985 cited in Elo, et al., 2014), it is required, for the trustworthiness of the study, to acknowledge limitations, as they may reveal areas for further research. Trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry aims to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are 'worth paying attention to' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Elo, et al., 2014). To ensure the *credibility* of this research, I ensured that the participants in this study are identified and described adequately. It was also important that data from the participants had to be recorded accurately. Shenton (2004) explains *credibility* as an attempt to demonstrate that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny is provided. To further increase *credibility,* I included member-checking of the findings by obtaining feedback from the participants on the data, interpretation, and conclusions. In this study, my colleague who is a

senior lecturer and a quality assurance co-ordinator in English Studies, acted as a 'peer debriefer', as he used his experience in ODeL to advise on the flaws in the approach, which were then identified and eliminated. In this study, one of the limitations was that e-tutors at this university should be activated as the need arises when students register. This means that at the time of this research, some e-tutors were not yet activated for the semester. It should also be noted that this study was based on a small sample drawn from e-tutors and lecturers of one module; therefore, the results may not be generalisable in a different context. However, the findings discussed may further influence future research about caring in online learning. Additionally, it would have helped to obtain the voice of the students on the issue of care during the Covid-19 lockdown, but this was a challenge because this is a semester module and once students pass, it is difficult to collect data from them. Even though a survey was sent to some identified students, the response rate was extremely low.

Another limitation of this study was that data could only be collected at the end of the semester when the e-tutors were done with their e-tutoring for that period. In some cases, e-tutors lose their access to the LMS if they are not activated for the second semester. This hurt the response rate of the e-tutors. With the lecturers of this module, four out of eight lecturers returned the survey since other colleagues battled with internet connection.

Findings and discussion

In this section, the data obtained using a qualitative research method is presented and discussed. The findings from the survey responses of e-tutors (n = 8) and lecturers (n = 4) will be presented and discussed in conjunction with data from the teaching documents analysed. In each case, an analysis of the data will be followed by a brief interpretation of the findings. As mentioned above, the data analysis was done by examining the e-tutor and lecturer responses to a survey they completed, and the teaching documents analysed. The views of the e-tutors and lecturers on 'caring' during the Covid-19 pandemic were used to further explore their understanding of the concept of relational care ethics. Some of the questions asked sought to unpack how the participants enacted care during their e-tutoring or teaching, what their understanding of this phenomenon was and what kind of support they received from the module lecturers, and how lecturers cultivated care on the e-tutors.

Theme 1: E-tutoring and teaching styles during the Covid-19 pandemic

When the e-tutors were asked to share their e-tutoring styles during the covid-19 pandemic, it appeared as though there was minimal or no change in how they tutored during this time. Some had not seen the need to do so, as expressed by this e-tutor (ETm7):

> No, was not necessary. As always, I use videos (YouTube), give students contemporary topics, and ask for their opinion. I seem to get a lot of interaction with this type of engagement.

For this e-tutor, the belief is that using digital learning materials would help increase interaction, but this is not the case. In the view of Liyanagunawardena, et al. (2013), the steep learning curve and an overload of information, especially for those who are not familiar with or experienced in online learning and teaching, could harm learners as they may feel demotivated and discouraged. In the view of Cicha, et al. (2021:4) they observed that according to studies conducted globally there was no one model for teaching classes online. This is concerning, considering that many students in this module are first-year students from previously disadvantaged schooling backgrounds and they may feel overwhelmed by the digital learning materials posted on the LMS. The concern increased when many students faced serious challenges with technology-related problems during lockdown like data, internet connection, and network problems in general since most of them had to go back to their homes. Researchers like Aruleba, et al. (2022) contend that when addressing these challenges, different factors such as the socio-economic challenges faced by lecturers, students, and universities, affordability, staff training, and access to computers and necessary software must be considered.

When lecturers were asked a similar question about changing their teaching styles during the Covid-19 pandemic, this is one of the responses that caught my attention:

> I did change by being involved in live stream sessions and conducting Microsoft teams. This is the only time I have available. There are just too many other aspects to work on in my role than to embrace a myriad of teaching methods. (Lm2)

From this comment, this lecturer had no planned intentions to change his teaching approach during the lockdown period as he felt that his workload was too much. The student support methods that he mentions have been in use before the Covid-19 pandemic period. In the view of Grant-Smith and Payne (2021), as educators at different levels of our engagement with the students, we struggled to ensure quality and care in our teaching in a time of unprecedented upheaval and change. It is, therefore, difficult to apportion blame on the lecturers as they were battling with the new changes of conducting online exams, as well as moving the module fully online.

One of the documents which contains important information about the module outcomes, lecturers' contact details, the assessment plan, available student support, and library resources are Tutorial Letter 101. What caught my attention about this document is that no mention was made of the e-tutors. The excerpt below emphasises the lecturers and not the e-tutors:

> Look out for information from your lecturer as well as other Unisa platforms to determine how to access the virtual myUnisa module site. Information on the tools that will be available to engage with the lecturer and fellow students to support your learning will also be communicated via various platforms.

One may assume that the role of e-tutors is downplayed, and lecturers are presented as important role players in this case. If one looks at the welcome page for this module the following message was posted:

> Welcome to the Academic Language and Literacy in English (ENG1503) module. This module aims to equip you with academic reading and writing for you to be able to handle your academic studies at university. The module is part of many different qualifications. We try to cater for diversity. In addition, we require you to give us feedback from time to time on how best we can address your language and literacy needs. This site will help you navigate through ENG1503 using information and announcements; official and additional study material; activities and assignments and forums for networking with other students and tutors. This is an activity-driven module, so the more you visit the site (and engage with what it offers) the better!
>
> You can download the materials, that is, the study guide and **Tutorial letter 101** where you will find your assignments. Please participate in the online self-assessment activities and the discussion forums for a fruitful learning experience and interaction with other students. It will also help you a great deal to actively communicate with your e-tutors. You will find this site, and module exciting and challenging. We hope you will also enjoy and learn from it.

What caught my interest in this message is that nothing was mentioned about the prevailing situation of Covid-19 as if everything was happening normally. Usually, when there are emergency situations that crop up, academics are able to edit the welcome message online and add the required information, yet, in this case, none of that was done. Therefore, it would appear as though no conditions of care were created and there was no evidence that a context of care was embraced. Corbera, et al. (2020: 194) highlight the importance of making sure that participants in online classes have the chance to express their thoughts about the crisis and to ask students to reflect on existing connections between Covid-19 and the studied issue at hand. In the view of Grant-Smith and Payne (2021) such outside-class communication of this kind not only assists students with academic issues but presents an opportunity to add an emotional dimension to student-educator relations. This would be useful for the students in this module which focuses on academic reading and writing skills as it would provide students with an opportunity to express their thoughts while practicing reading and writing.

Theme 2: e-tutors' and lecturers' understanding of care ethics

Both e-tutors and lecturers seemed to have a vague understanding of the concept of caring, even though they may have not been exposed to the principles of caring as espoused by researchers like Noddings (1984; 1988). The following comment indicated some understanding of caring as the e-tutor mentions the students' feelings:

To foster an environment where students want to learn, they need to feel that they are not alone in their struggles and hardships. (ETf2)

Another e-tutor seemed to feel strongly about caring and had this to say:

Very important. We need to foster an environment that will encourage students to study. A hostile and uncaring environment will discourage students from continuing with their studies. (ETf7)

Researchers agree that to foster care for the students, there is a need to understand what students love, what they fear, and what they hope for. Additionally, Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012, cited in Borzkut, 2020) opine that research has shown that emotions play a major role in the online learning experience itself, and not only during the transition to online learning. On the side of the lecturers, there seemed to be a consensus about the importance of care in their interactions with the students. Comments like:

Definitely. Because students need to know that we are there to support them. (Lf1)

Another lecturer who also recognised the need for caring in teaching expressed his view about this:

I think "caring" is ideal in small classes and not in big classes. Certainly, you cannot implement it in undergraduate modules. (Lm2)

Another lecturer who also saw the need for additional care during the pandemic provided an example of how he provided care for students during this time. He said the following:

… we also had to give more time to our students to do their assignments and accepted a considerable number of late assignment submissions because our students were faced with different challenges. (Lm1)

A comment like this shows that this lecturer responded positively to the students' needs.

Theme 3: E-tutor interaction with students during the covid 19 pandemic

When the e-tutors were asked about their e-tutoring style during the lockdown, (ETf6) had the following to say:

During the hard lockdown in 2020, there was a marked decline in student interaction; however, in 2021, more students participated by viewing the discussions and downloading

the additional resources I uploaded. Most of the interaction was related to the downloading of the notes I uploaded than contributing to discussions or completing the activities I posted.

When one looks closely at this comment, the marked decline was expected as most of the people panicked when they were caught unawares by the lockdown. Another reason for this is the inequalities regarding access to technology and internet connection since many of the students had to be locked down in spaces that were not conducive for studying purposes. This is in line with what researchers emphasise about the challenges with technology during the lockdown. Borzkut, et al. (2020) are of the view that the stark digital divide between those who had access to electricity, internet infrastructure, data, and devices, and those who did not was quite notable during this period of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the view of Liyanagunawardena, et al. (2013: 4), learners from developing countries came from geographical locations with various levels of infrastructural facilities, the majority of which suffered from poor digital infrastructure. What also caught my attention was that some e-tutors viewed downloading of learning materials by students as interaction. This is problematic, as viewing and downloading learning materials does not necessarily constitute interaction in online learning.

Theme 4: Support from the module lecturers during this time

It was crucial to establish whether lecturers had provided any support to e-tutors during the lockdown. When e-tutors and lecturers were asked about this, comments like the following were shared by the e-tutors:

Very limited support in terms of the course. There was some support when it came to assessments (why students hadn't received feedback, etc. (ETm1)

On a similar note, another e-tutor commented:

I would hope that module lecturers take into consideration the obstacles during the pandemic, one of which is limited access to resources and the extra effort to function efficiently during this period of closure and lockdown. (ETm2)

From these comments, data points to lecturers who did not provide any additional support for e-tutors during this time. This confirms the view that they needed support. In a different vein, it is problematic to fault the lecturers because they were affected in one way or the other by the effects of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown. Corbera, et al. (2020) caution against expecting people to conduct business as usual in the wake of a global pandemic and maintain the same pace of productivity and engagement with their job duties. Regarding lecturers providing care to e-tutors, it is also possible that the issue of 'care' was not prioritised by the lecturers of this module. In the view of Bali (2020) cited in Borzkut, et al. (2020), prioritising the

issues of care, empathy and emotional/psychological support should not be limited to the classroom setting or only targeted towards students but also embodied in educational policy and decision-making that impact educators and staff as well. In a different vein, when lecturers were asked about how they should enact care on the e-tutors in the module, data from the lecturers indicated varied views on this. Comments like the following indicate that lecturers do not understand how to enact care on the e-tutors:

I currently do not see any care for e-tutors in the module I teach (Lf1)

...care when 1 e-tutor has a ratio of 500 students just means being able to render educational needs for massification. There is hardly a ratio for lecturers to students. (Lm2)

Conclusion

In this study, the survey questions that were answered by e-tutors of the Academic Language and Literacy in English module helped to obtain their perspectives on enacting care during their interaction with the students. Even though care is viewed as an essential component in online interaction, what became evident was that e-tutors' understanding of the concept of care in online teaching was very fuzzy. Therefore, it would be challenging to expect them to enact something they have little or no understanding of. An additional point to note is that it appeared as though lecturers were also not able to support e-tutors in how to cultivate care during their interaction with the students due to their workloads.

This study investigated how e-tutors of an English for Academic Language and Literacy in English module in an ODeL institution cultivated care in their students during the covid-19 pandemic. The literature review and the findings of the research confirmed the need for foregrounding care in e-tutor-student online interaction. Even though the concept of care in higher education has been the focus of much research, there seems to be no study on how e-tutors enact care in ODeL spaces. Future research should focus on foregrounding care in interaction among e-tutors, lecturers, and students to prepare in advance for any unplanned disruptions in the education process. I would recommend that interaction among these groups be explicitly integrated into the module design process so that e-tutors, lecturers, and students all understand care in online teaching and learning. The Covid-19 pandemic made it more urgent for ODeL institutions to re-think their operations and to plan for unprecedented emergencies like the #Fees Must Fall campaign and future pandemics. This will have implications for e-tutoring at this ODeL university.

Author Biography

Dr Thembeka Shange is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English Studies at the University of South Africa. Her research and teaching focus is primarily on Applied English Language Studies, Academic Development, Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Open Distance Learning.

References

Abdullah, H. & Mtsweni, J. 2014. The role of e-tutors in promoting e-learning using Web 2.0 technologies. Proceedings of the African Cyber Citizenship Conference 2014 Port Elizabeth, 5-6 November 2014.

Aruleba, K., Jere, N. & Matariramo, O. 2022. Technology adoption readiness in disadvantaged universities during Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 11(2): 172-180.

Bajaj, M. 2016. *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Bartos, A.E. 2021. Troubling false care: towards a more revolutionary "care revolution" in the university ACME. *An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 20(3): 312-321.

Bergmark, U. & Alerby, E. 2006. Ethics of care – a dilemma or a challenge in education? Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education National Conference (AARE), Adelaide, Australia, 27-30 November 2006.

Bozkurt, A., Jung, I., Xiao, J., Vladimirschi, V., Schuwer, R., Egorov, G., Lambert, S.R., Al-Freih M., Pete. J., Olcott, D., Jr., Rodes, V., Aranciaga, I., Bali, M., Alvarez, A.V., Roberts, J., Pazurek, A., Raffaghelli, J.E., Panagiotou, N., de Coëtlogon, P., Shahadu, S., Brown, M., Asino., T.I, Tumwesige, J., Reyes, T.R., Ipenza, E.B., Ossiannilsson, E., Bond, M., Belhamel, K., Irvine, V., Sharma, R.C, Adam, T., Janssen, B., Sklyarova, T., Olcott, N., Ambrosino, A., Lazou, C., Mocquet, B., Mano, M. & Paskevicius, M. 2020. A global outlook to the interruption of education due to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Navigating in a time of uncertainty and crisis. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1): 1- 126.

Burke, K. & Larmar, S. 2021. Acknowledging another face in the virtual crowd: Reimagining the online experience in higher education through an online pedagogy of care. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(5): 601-615.

Cicha, K., Rizun, M., Rutecka, P. & Strzelecki, A. 2021. COVID-19 and higher education: First-year students' expectations toward distance learning. *Sustainability*. 13(1889):1-19.

College of Human Sciences Advert for E-tutors. 2019. The University of South Africa.

Corbera E., Anguelovski, I., Honey-Rosés, J. & Ruiz-Mallén, I. 2020. Academia in the time of COVID-19: Towards an ethics of care. *Planning Theory & Practice,* 21(2): 191-199.

Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D. (eds.) 2018. *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 5th edition. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Inc.

Dela Cruz, N.L. 2020. Pusong Mamon: Nel Noddings's care ethics in the Filipino Educational Setting. *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 17: 1-19.

Duncan-Andrade, J. 2009. Note to educators: Hope is required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79: 181-194.

Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K. & Kyngäs, H. 2014. Qualitative content analysis: A focus on trustworthiness. *SAGE Open,* 1-10.

Feldman, J. 2020. An ethics of care: PGCE students' experiences of online learning during Covid-19. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning,* 8(2):1-17.

Grant-Smith, D. & Payne, R. 2021. Enacting care-ful engagement in the (post)pandemic care-less university. In Bozkurt, A. (ed.) *Handbook of Research on Emerging Pedagogies for the Future of Education: Trauma-Informed, Care, and Pandemic Pedagogy.* Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 169-190.

Hsieh, H.F. & Shannon, S. 2005. Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9): 1277-1288.

Joubert, Y.T. & Snyman, A.M. 2018. Challenges experienced with online tutoring in an ODL institution. *Progressio Journal for Open Distance Learning Practice,* 39(1): 126-144.

Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E.G. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Beverley Hills: SAGE Publications.

Lincoln, Y.S. & Denzin, N.K. (eds.) 2003. *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman Altamira.

Liyanagunawardena, T. R., Adams, A. A. & Williams, S.A. 2013. MOOCs: A systematic study of the published literature 2008-2012. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 14(3): 202-227.

Mare, S.M. & Mutezo, A.T. 2021. The effectiveness of e-tutoring in an open and distance e-learning environment: Evidence from the University of South Africa. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance, and e-Learning*, 36(2): 164-180.

Noblit, G. 1993. The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education (review). *Educational Studies,* 24(4): 369-373.

Noddings, N. 1984. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Noddings, N. 1988. An ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements. *American Journal of Education*, 96(2): 215-230

Noddings, N. 2006. *Critical Lessons: What our Schools should Teach*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Noddings, N. 2012. The caring relation in teaching, *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(6): 771-781.

Noddings, N. 2015. Care ethics and "caring organizations. In Engster, D. & Hamington, M. (eds.) *Care Ethics and Political Theory*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 72-84.

Noddings, N. 2016. Caring and peace education. In Bajaj, M. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc, 87-91.

Owens, L.M. & Ennis, C.D. 2005. The ethic of care in teaching: An overview of supportive literature. *Quest*: 392-425.

Rabin, C. 2021. Care ethics in online teaching. *Studying Teacher Education,* 17(1): 38-56.

Robinson, H.A., Kigore, W. & Al-Freih, M. 2021. A care-centered approach to online learning design and pedagogy. Open Technology in Education, Society, and Scholarship Association. Conference Proceedings, 1: 1-5.

Rose, E. & Adams, C. 2014. "Will I ever connect with the students?" : Online teaching and the pedagogy of care. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 7(2): 5-16.

Rose, E. 2017. Beyond Social Presence: Facelessness and the Ethics of Asynchronous Online Education. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue dessciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 52(1): 17-32.

Shange, T. C. 2021. Fostering symbiosis between e-tutors and lecturers of an English studies module at an open distance learning University in South Africa. *Open Praxis*. 13(3): 253-263.

Shenton, A. 2004. Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22: 63-75.

Snape, D. & Spencer, L. 2003**.** The foundations of qualitative research. In Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J. (eds). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: SAGE Publications.

Swartz, B.C., Gachago, D. & Belford C. 2018. To care or not to care-reflections on the ethics of blended learning in times of disruption. *South African Journal of Higher Education.* 32(6): 49-64.

Tutorial Letter 101/0/2022. 2022. Academic language and literacy in English for academic purposes. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Velasquez, A., Graham, C.R. & West, R.E. 2013. An investigation of practices and tools that enabled technology-mediated caring in an online high school. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 14(5): 277-299.

Appendix A: Interview questions to e-tutors

Dear colleagues

I am conducting research into using 'care ethics' to increase student participation in online interaction within the ENG1503 module. This is entirely voluntary and will assist us in planning for the future. Could you kindly respond to the following questions as honestly as possible? No names will be used in the reporting of the data and findings. This research falls within the English Studies project with the following Ethical clearance details: **NHREC Registration #: Rec-240816-052**

CREC Reference # :90258495_CREC_CHS_2021

1. How many students do you have in your e-tutoring group?
2. About how many participated actively in 2021? (You may provide statistics from myUnisa)
3. Did you change your e-tutoring style during the covid-19 pandemic? If yes, why? If not, why not? If yes, how did you change your e-tutoring style?
4. Did you notice an increase or decline in student interaction patterns during the covid-19 pandemic? Briefly explain your observations in this regard.
5. Did you receive additional support from the module lecturers during this time? If yes, what was the nature of the support?
6. What kind of support did you expect from the module lecturers during this time?
7. Do you regard "caring" as an important aspect of online interaction with students? If so, why, or if not, why not?
8. What do you think 'caring' constitutes in e-tutoring?
9. Any other comments about your interaction with students during the covid-19 pandemic?

Thank you for your participation.
Dr. Thembeka Shange
Department of English Studies
UNISA

Appendix B: Interview questions to lecturers

Dear colleagues

I am researching using care ethics to increase student participation in online interaction within the English Studies modules at UNISA. This is entirely voluntary and will assist us in planning for the future. Could you kindly respond to the following questions as honestly as possible? No names will be used in the reporting of the data and findings. This research falls within the English Studies project with the following Ethical clearance details: **NHREC Registration #: Rec-240816-052**

CREC Reference # :90258495_CREC_CHS_2021

1. How many students do you have in your module?
2. About how many students participated actively in 2021? (You may provide statistics from Myunisa)
3. Did you change your teaching style during the Covid 19 pandemic? If yes, why? If not, why not?
4. Did you notice an increase or decline in student interaction patterns during the Covid 19 pandemic? Briefly explain your observations in this regard.
5. Did you provide additional support to e-tutors in your module during this time? If yes, what was the nature of the support?
6. What kind of support do you think would be expected by e-tutors from the module lecturers during this time?
7. Do you regard "caring" as an important aspect of online interaction with students? If so, why, or if not, why not?
8. How do you think lecturers can enact 'care' on the e-tutors of their modules?
9. Any other comments about your interaction with e-tutors during the Covid 19 pandemic?

Thank you for your participation.
Dr. Thembeka Shange
Department of English Studies
UNISA
Contact details: ezengetc@unisa.ac.za or telephone 012-429 6954