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Reimagining a Pedagogy of Care Using ePortfolios as a scholarly, 'visibility' tool in Higher education

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Abstract

Assigning ePortfolio tasks to students should not only focus on instruction and activities that connect to real world learning. Humanising the learning experience by constructing an environment and teaching approach that builds trust, respect and resilience will strengthen learning partnerships, resulting in enhanced achievement for students (Henriksen et al., 2022). The aim of this paper is to consider how embodying a pedagogy of care can humanise the learning experience of ePortfolio activities in an online environment. How could we institute a pedagogy of care when designing ePortfolio tasks with academic colleagues? What strategies do we use to develop a safe space to reflect on our experience? How would a pedagogy of care approach improve student outcomes and inform new ways of working and studying? Findings indicated that implementation of the Modelling and Dialogue phases to support student learning, based on Noddings' 1988 framework, enabled the students to transform their learning due to scaffolding, building trust and the authors encouraging a collegial environment to share feedback.

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore practical strategies for humanising the learning experience when designing ePortfolio tasks and assessment by using aspects of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2018) situated in an Activity-Centred Analysis and Design (ACAD) framework (Goodyear et al., 2021). Therefore, the pedagogy of care we propose aims to humanise the learning experience by providing empathetic lecturers who facilitate the learning, ensuring safe online sharing of practice spaces with assurances of confidentiality from peers, and providing feedback in the form of clarifying questions rather than judgement.

The article outlines the process for adopting a Pedagogy of Care approach when designing, developing, and implementing ePortfolio assessments that are authentic and should support academic teachers to adjust and refine teaching in their respective disciplines. Noddings' (1988) Pedagogy of Care model has been applied to the authors' practice which we hope could be adapted into other academic teachers' contexts. With the addition of Phase 5, Visibility as Education Care, it is hoped that these initial steps will enable academics to take charge of their own 'visibility', at times, with people and in milieu that suit their circumstances by using ePortfolios as profiling and marketing vehicles.

While the authors acknowledge that there are various models of learning, theories and dimensions that need to be reviewed to further research in this area, this paper shares strategies they might use in their redesign and teaching. Feedback from the ePortfolio network will help inform next steps in the development of an 'education' pedagogy of care.

Academic teachers naturally adopt teaching behaviours that encourage positive engagement by students, namely getting better acquainted and building rapport through trust and collaboration (Kizilcik & Türüdü, 2022). So, it may be beneficial in designing online learning experiences to ensure strategies of care are explicit. Designing with care in mind may be especially helpful where educators are the students, as they experience vulnerability through empathetic teaching which informs their establishment of safe and inclusive learning environments (Parson & Kitsch, 2022).

Background and Context

The students enrolled in the technology-for-learning microcredentials, taught by the authors, are faculty academic colleagues and professional staff located in a multiple-campus university in Australia. The disciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching experience of participants in the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (GCHE) varies considerably. The programs aim to develop knowledge, teaching practice that inspires empathetic teaching and simultaneously increases opportunities for scholarly teaching (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2021). For two iterations of the technology-for-learning microcredentials, the central assessment artefact has been an ePortfolio hosting the resources, reflections and justification for design or redesign of a learning sequence (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2021). The authors sought to integrate pedagogies of care to improve the value and validity of ePortfolio assessment in these microcredentials.

ePortfolio practical task redesign within a pedagogy of care

In addition to the transformative learning theory which underpins proposed changes, a practical approach to improving student learning using an ethics of care in the portfolio tasks, is to use the design dimensions on an existing framework such as Noddings' (1988) framework of moral education, discussed by Burke and Larmar (2021). There are three main ways that instructors can model care such as: framing questions collegially, being present when feedback is given during live sessions and responding positively to student commentary. Explicit and implicit care must be adaptable and adjusted to be supportive in different ePortfolio contexts.

The ACAD design was used to chart the rationale, process, and embed a transformative approach to support student progress. The main activity assigned to the students was charting the steps of their transformative journey to reach their goal. At the commencement of their learning students were expected to reflect on a teaching challenge. There were four components as described by Goodyear (2021): epistemic relating to the task, where it is physically situated or the set, social and intended outcomes. This was part of the epistemic design to identify existing knowledge about a teaching dilemma that would transform into an opportunity to adjust and improve their teaching and student outcomes.

Care in a learning and teaching context is modelled to foster a safe learning environment for the cohort. For this approach to be effective, it is important to select aspects such as feedback, which may be adapted and adjusted into different ePortfolio contexts to transform learning (Hui et al., 2023). The authors introduced an ePortfolio template where each student could include their learning goal as well as describe their teaching practice before and after they commenced this microcredential.

Feedback was provided in written format. Sample feedback as well as clarification questions are provided to support staff and students commenting on peers' work. A safe online learning environment was created and modelled by the instructors to help build trust that feedback, questions, and engagement is genuinely provided to assist each student improve their evaluation and redesign of their teaching dilemma (Hui et al., 2023).

The authors introduced an ePortfolio template where each student could include their learning goal as well as describe their teaching practice before and after they commenced this microcredential. Feedback via a short video recording could be introduced to increase social presence and connection (Lowenthal, 2021). Sample feedback as well as clarification questions are provided to support staff and students commenting on peers' work.

Model Steps

Modelling (Phase 1)

In this phase instructors demonstrate how to commence an educational task as follows based on Noddings (1988) scholarship:

Step 1 – Instructors set up a template for each student

Step 2 – Instructors set up a 'model' template that is populated with one instructor's goal, before and after descriptions of practice

Step 3 - A feedback section is included in the modelling phase for the second instructor to pose questions of clarification.

Step 4 – Students access their template and input goals, background, context, and descriptions of practice.

The caring in this phase concentrates on the behaviour and character of the teacher (Noddings, 2012).

The second phase of the pedagogy of care approach was the dialogue. Structured dialogue opportunities for students assumed the form of regular online drop ins facilitated by the two authors. The format for this approach was as follows:

Dialogue Sessions (Phase 2)

Step 1 – Scheduling of drop in sessions

Step 2 – Instructors invited discussion and input when they modelled creating an eportfolio

Step 3 – Students asked key questions about the learning activities and the course.

Step 4 – Students were invited to communicate issues impacting on their ability to complete tasks (provided they were happy to share with the group).

Step 5 – Peers or staff led these dialogue sessions.

Teaching sessions were designed to help students get to know peers and build trust. The instructors and students came to know each other well: strategies could include synchronous drop-ins, asynchronous engagement in forums, synchronous peer review discussions, and short videos.

Practice Sessions (Phase 3)

In this Phase the instructors provided online space in the Learning Management System (LMS), for students to communicate asynchronously (or synchronously) with each other as well as their peers. The steps in the practice session phase are as follows:

Step 1 – An online asynchronous space was set up by the instructors.

Step 2 – Short video recording prepared by the instructors explained how students could engage with each other and the instructors.

Step 3 – Written guidance was posted weekly in the LMS microcredential site.

Step 4 – Students were encouraged to practice their draft presentations, upload pre-recorded video or written work for feedback.

Step 5 – Feedback was explained and supported by recent literature so that experienced academics (those new to academic roles or teaching) had a clear understanding of how to give and receive feedback. In addition, there were online video conferencing sessions that explained how the instructors would give and receive feedback.

In this phase students were provided with diverse opportunities to practice their responses orally and in written assignments. Additional check-ins were offered on demand and negotiated with the instructors. Peers were encouraged to connect with each other. The purpose of the activities in

Phase 3 was to build confidence and encourage participation in real world challenges. Academic teachers would foster engagement in care-giving activities to develop the ability to care.

Confirmation Sessions (Phase 4)

In Noddings (1988) final phase of the Pedagogy of Care model trust and continuity are the key elements. Success in this phase depends on a relationship between the cared for (students who are staff) and the carer (instructor).

Step 1 - Instructors continue to be open, available, and responsive (Barrow, 2015).

Step 2 - Students realise and embrace challenges are opportunities to transform learning.

Step 3 - Relationships between peers and instructors increase motivation, achievement and lessen fear of making mistakes.

This is the final phase of Noddings 1988 Pedagogy of Care model. Where all members involved in the care process showed an elevated level of trust, reciprocity, and motivation. It is interesting to note that not all students advised their instructors what the experience meant to them. Barrow notes that the reception of caring is not always observable and could emerge through reflection which is not always shared with instructors or peers (Barrow, 2015).

Visibility as Education Care (Phase 5)

The Visibility as Education care (or communicating 'visibility') is an additional phase the authors propose to extend Noddings (1988) Pedagogy of Care Model which could be beneficial for students (who are university staff). Karlsdottir (2023) suggests that there are factors that hinder academics' participation in collaborative activities which may increase their visibility. So, it is important to be aware of these issues and integrate staff input, supported by research, to determine what best suits their circumstances.

Step 1 - The students work more collaboratively with their higher education trusted peers to improve their ability to reflect on their experiences using reflexivity and develop strategies for visibility.

Step 2 – Instructors (or peers) may become mentors to staff (who were students) and support strategies for contribution to events inside or external to their institution for career development.

Step 3 – A community of practice for supporting development of ePortfolios for a specific purpose is established at the students' institution or encourage participation in the ePortfolios Australia network.

Step 4 – More experienced academics and other university staff with specific expertise could facilitate webinars or workshops that help academics learn to help themselves, develop independence and create opportunities to model their own work using technological tools such as ePortfolios

Rationale for a Pedagogy of Care Approach In Post Graduate Qualifications

The rationale for integrating a pedagogy of care approach into teaching with ePortfolios is to increase academic staff's confidence and sense of purpose using technology to profile and improve their scholarship (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022). Participation amongst

academics is more likely to occur if a care element is incorporated into professional practice. Encouraging participation that will foster achievement, visibility of their work as well as improvements in teaching is essential for progress (Eynon et al., 2014). A care approach encourages academics to experiment, take risks presenting innovative ideas, and builds a community of scholarly confidence. Confidence emerges when students' (who are staff) work is recognised, used as a model for others, comes to the attention of their university and external partners.

A Pedagogy of Care Process

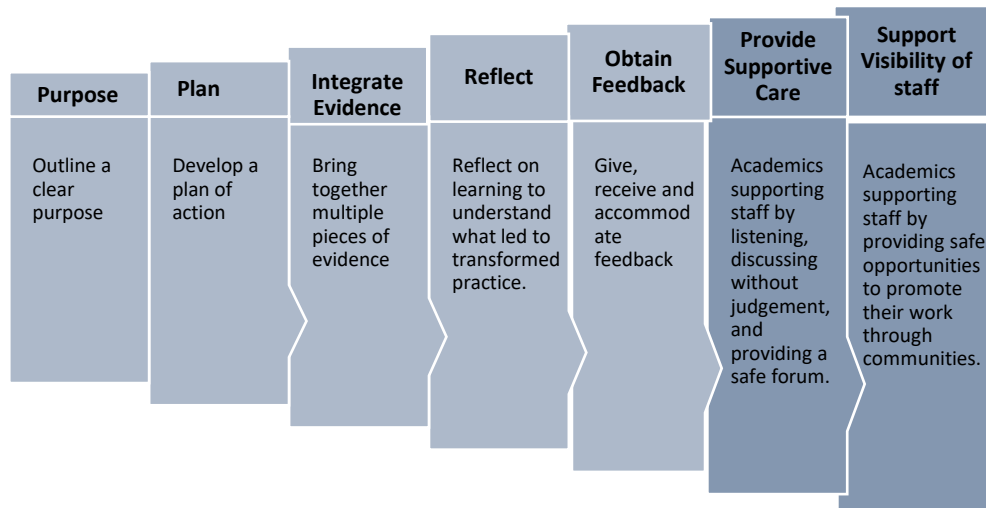
A pedagogy of care process using ePortfolios for completion of improving an aspect of your teaching, could be introduced as follows:

- **Define a purpose** – academics begin with a clear purpose (Sharma et al., 2022).
- **Plan** – teaching academics collaborate with the staff (who are students) to develop a plan of action which could take the form of a change in their online teaching activities.
- **Integrate evidence** – bringing in multiple pieces of evidence from a plethora of contexts and learning new strategies for profiling themselves in ways that promote visibility, connection, and best practice in education activities, within their disciplines (Eynon, et al., 2014) .
- **Reflect**– recording, sharing reflection on learning to understand the conditions that let to transformations in their practice (Carson, et al., 2014)
- **Obtain feedback** - accommodating feedback from a wide variety of places – communication of what feedback is, is not and how it can enhance rather than demoralise one's contributions.
- **Supportive care** – may take the form of teaching academics assisting the staff explore avenues, in a safe environment, using their ePortfolios to present their scholarship to their Head of School, faculty or for promotion.
- **Visibility of the staff (students)** – teaching academics assist staff (who are students) develop and implement a supportive environment to promote, their work, contribution, collaboration & growth with the emphasis on working in a learning community (Carson, et al, 2014).

The progression of the pedagogy of care process is shown in the diagram on the next page.

Figure 1

Pedagogy of Care Process



Source: Fisher, 2024

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation that will inform our proposed changes is Mezirow's transformative learning. In his theory Mezirow (2018), proposes that learners can adjust their thinking and practice, transforming past ideas, beliefs as well as values, and shifting their world view (Sahin, Erisen & Celikoz, 2016). The disorienting dilemma for our faculty academics is evaluation of a teaching challenge which can become emotionally overwhelming for them when it is communicated in a public domain for peers to comment on (Cranton & Roy, 2003). Deep, critical reflection enables both staff and students to understand their motivation and decision making by examining their thoughts and feelings in a concentrated, constructed manner (Chan & Lee, 2021).

The reflections which are part of the ePortfolio assessment help staff justify changes to aspects of a unit they teach but are often 'toned down' due to feelings of uncertainty about the safety of the environment they publish in (Chan & Lee, 2021; Sahin et al., 2016). Withholding emotions impacts on the transformational learning process that occurs when identifying changes and proposing a solution or new knowledge such as redesign of online learning activities, guidance, and feedback (Cranton & Roy, 2003). Academics are more willing to show their instrumental learning identifying cause and effect than communicative learning which exposes their feelings and emotions when trust, respect and acceptance are evident in the milieu (Chan et al., 2021).

The concept of Pedagogy of care is a formulation for the pedagogical approach that insists that for learning to happen there must be reciprocal caring relationships between teachers and students which support wellbeing and achievement. Pedagogies of care in higher education are not new (Robinson et al., 2020). Care emerged in the 1980s as a core moral and pedagogical concept, articulated by Noddings (1984) via psychology (Gilligan, 1982) within a long tradition of humanistic education (Barek et al., 2021). Emergency online teaching sharpened this focus:

holistic education for social and emotional wellbeing, namely teaching grounded in care, has been a response to differential engagement by students post-pandemic (Robinson et al., 2020).

Processes of collaborative caring in academic learning are varied and often lack the structure that higher education teachers need but are either too embarrassed to identify, unsure how to request guidance, or do not have access to institutional support (Karlsdottir, et al., 2023). Recent literature guiding the introduction of ePortfolios has emphasised the importance of engaging students (who may be university staff) in the planning as well as informing teaching academics about types of support they may need (Siddiqui, Fisher et al., 2023). The types of processes that academic teachers observe as challenging for students are computer-based skills, reflective practice and managing their individual 'overload' due to work commitments and pressure to achieve milestones as opposed to actual learning. Knowing how to use the ePortfolio as a process for reflecting, refining, and improving teaching tends to take second place to 'the final' portfolio as the emphasis tends to be on the presentation of a tangible product to demonstrate scholarship. It is important to note that processes of care relate to the person, the organisational culture and ePortfolio environment and encourage self-directed learning and collaboration (Zhang & Tur, 2023).

Transforming challenges to opportunities using pedagogy of care

A pedagogy of care should be simple, measurable, provide opportunities and allow students to work through any limitations. Measurement of success with small cohorts was potentially easier to infer from general feedback to the authors, observing the cohort and students sharing their reflection. While the first two phases of a pedagogy of care were able to be implemented namely: modelling and dialogue, the authors noted that there were factors such as the short length of the credential, scheduling issues and small cohorts that may have impeded implementation of the last two phases, practice, and confirmation in the ways they expected. Therefore, in this paper the final two phases from Noddings' 1988 Pedagogy of Care model have been included as a worked example which has been discussed earlier in the paper. Phase 5, which focuses on Visibility of Academic achievement is an extension of the model offered by the authors.

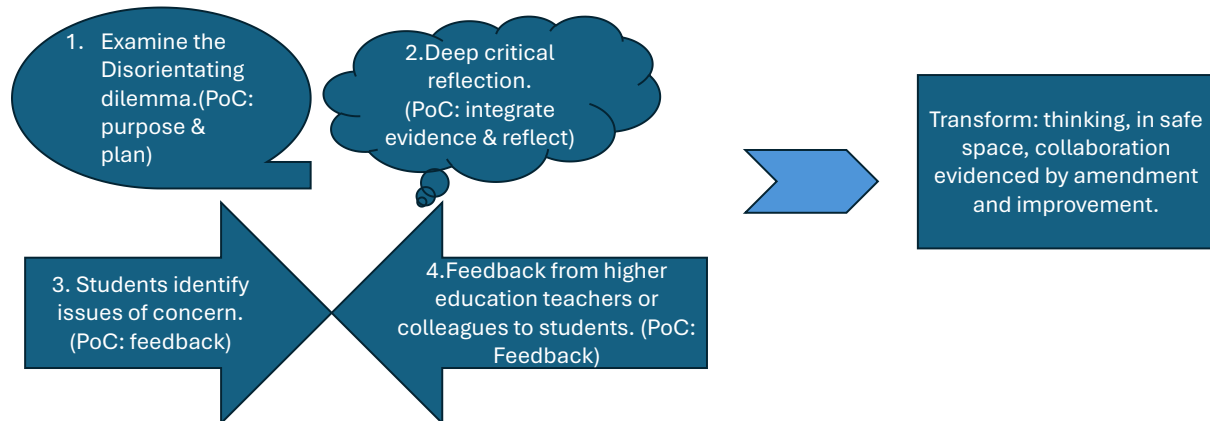
The authors observed that most staff (who were students) were not thinking about undertaking the micro-qualification with 'active' transformation in mind. It was observed that most students wanted to improve their technology skills for teaching. What they found was that they reflected more deeply, at times felt challenged but changed these experiences into opportunities to 'fix' an issue in their teaching.

Figure 2

Alignment of the Pedagogy of Care Process

Alignment of the Pedagogy of Care Process

- Theoretical Foundation
- Disorienting dilemma – evaluation of teaching challenge



Source: Fisher, 2024

Improving outcomes for Students

Improving outcomes for students is a key goal in academic learning in the higher education milieu. Outcomes should not be limited to successfully passing an online unit of study in a microcredential or postgraduate degree. Care should emerge through the interactions between students, peers and academics teaching the course, which inform and guide the process leading to completion of the ePortfolio task.

Over several micro-credential teaching sessions, the authors observed that once rapport and trust had been built between the teachers in the course and staff (who were students), many students expressed concern about being 'time poor' and how they would be viewed by their school or supervisor if they were unable to complete the tasks and the qualification. Lewika (2022) highlighted the complexity of higher education organisations and states that both students and staff may struggle with a sense of identity. In addition, as with the authors' observations, Lewika (2022) argues that if a student has a negative experience in a social or work interaction has a stronger impact than positive experiences. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to change behaviour and encourage peer collaboration.

As a result, significant care was taken by the teachers in the course to discuss and hear from students about issues that impacted on the benefits of peer evaluation, co-operative sharing of ideas and peer interactions. Zhang and Tur (2023) found in ePortfolio collaborative practice, students valued their engagement with peers and benefited from cooperative learning. However, over the course of two semesters the authors observed that if staff (who were students) did not

collaborate or feel comfortable permitting classmates to review and provide feedback to innovate their teaching, they showed signs of being overwhelmed and were more likely to withdraw or defer.

Conclusion

In this paper we have described a Pedagogy of Care process that supports our empathetic approach to educative practice. Academic practitioners can adapt this process to a variety of disciplines to pedagogically support an empathetic approach. All four phases of the pedagogy of care have been discussed in our context to show how academic teachers can co-design an inclusive approach to learning and teaching. The authors have proposed a fifth phase to show how academics could increase their impact and visibility. The visibility of one's achievements and collaborative endeavours highlights effective teaching and engagement of learners. When an academic's practice is recognised in a public way, they may be invited to share their experience, contribute to new research, and further transform their practice.

The redesign of this portfolio task considered how to reduce the barriers to its completion. The authors intended to evaluate the redesign in terms of the quality of reflection, breadth of solution seeking, and collegial tone in the peer reviews conducted by educator colleagues. The aim was to strengthen staff confidence, wellbeing, and comfort as participants in the challenging context of higher education:

“Rather we must intentionally design for care, to ensure that our learners as people do not get lost along the way.” (Henriksen et al., 2022, p. 89)

We will continue to transform our practice and strengthen the framework to support and guide our students' through a community of care to innovate their personal, professional, and learning activities and goals. However, further research is needed to encourage more academics to actively seek a pedagogy of care approach in their respective disciplines for the teachers and students.

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