



“It Felt Like a Real Classroom”: Applying Pedagogical Care in Online Teaching and Learning Design

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Abstract

Online learning widens access to higher education for underrepresented students. A safe learning space that fosters relational dialogue is crucial for recognising the “complexities and wisdom” that diverse learners bring and creating conditions that value students as “whole people” (Motta & Bennett, 2018). However, flexible delivery can make it challenging to engage online learners in class dialogue, especially students who lack confidence to engage with peers and teachers (Lawrence et al., 2024). In response, action research was undertaken with “equity-like” students enrolled in fully online human service degrees to learn about the barriers and enablers to joining class discussions. An applied framing of pedagogical care was used to co-design and evaluate a dialogic learning activity dubbed the “care-full Zoom” with multiple ways to join the conversation in synchronous and asynchronous modes. Mapping care-full teacher qualities to student learning outcomes revealed practical ways that pedagogical care can be exercised in online learning design. Results show considerably improved engagement with content, peers, and teachers following implementation of the care-full Zoom. Crucially, students reported greater confidence in their capabilities as students *and* as emerging lived experience practitioners. The findings are significant for supporting growing numbers of underrepresented students accessing higher education through online study options.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Pedagogical care is implicated in enhancing the student experience with equity and equity-like groups.
2. Equity and equity-like groups are increasingly taking up fully online study options in higher education, warranting a deeper examination of pedagogical care online.
3. Researching ways to intentionally exercise pedagogical care in online learning design needs to account for both synchronous and asynchronous sites of student engagement.
4. Evaluating online learner engagement requires a holistic understanding of student’s emotional and social engagement patterns in concert with behavioural and cognitive engagement.
5. Caring online teacher presence can usefully model self-disclosure and self-compassion to nurture lived experience students through relational dialogue.

Keywords

Pedagogical care, online learning design, relational dialogue, equity, human service education online

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Introduction

Online degrees can be a convenient choice for students wishing to fit study around competing life demands like employment or parenting. However, studying online might be the only option and therefore imperative for students who cannot attend a physical campus due to geographic location, health or disability status, or caring responsibilities (Stone & O'Shea, 2019b). While online learning creates educational opportunities, it can also pose challenges for building relationships with students, particularly those who sign up for asynchronous "study on demand" options with no compulsory requirements to engage with peers or teachers (Rowe, 2025). This is characteristic of the flexible model I currently teach in at an Australian university. There are no timetabled classes to attend and no compulsory requirements for students to engage with peers or teaching staff. Learners can dip into the asynchronous content as much or as little as they choose, whenever they choose, at any point in the 10 weeks that each course runs. Synchronous video conferencing drop-in sessions are offered to students, but typically not well subscribed, making it further difficult to engage students in critical class discussions.

Cohorts I teach are mostly comprised of students enrolled in online degrees relating to human services, with a smaller number of "on-campus" social work students needing to take one or more online subjects. Class sizes average seventy students: 91% are women and 93% are mature-age learners, many of whom have complex lived experiences and/or caring responsibilities. This is not unusual; human service professions tend to attract female-identifying workers from diverse backgrounds who are tenacious survivors in some form or another wishing to "give back" to others in need (Mackay, 2023). The human service workforce is richer for having lived experience practitioners (McDonnell & Wayland, 2024); but lived experience students can lack confidence in their capabilities for study and future practice and may feel undeserving of further education (Stone & O'Shea, 2019a). This seems true for many of my students who are bold about social justice and advocacy but lack confidence to speak up and advocate for change, which is a core task of human service practice (Banham, 2020).

Despite the implications for student poverty (see Cowan & Robinson, 2023), field practicum remains social work's signature pedagogy for preparing graduates with "hands on" experience for building confidence and learning to navigate challenging work contexts. But as Banham (2020) points out, the human service sector hosts a range of in-demand professions being taken up by graduates who have *not* undertaken field placements – such as my students studying online degrees marketed as graduate pathways to human service work in Australia, particularly in ageing and disability sectors with high demand for skilled workers. Social work literature has engaged with discipline specific challenges for online education (see Afrouz & Crisp, 2020; Davis et al., 2018). However, less is known about the approaches of online educators striving to prepare graduates for "successful" transitions to a broad range of paid and unpaid human service roles, often with minimal opportunities to help students hone practice skills.

Student "success" underscores the student experience, yet the contours of success are multifaceted and subjectively experienced by students within and beyond prescribed learning objectives (Arulkadacham et al., 2021). At the macro level, attention to student success informs policy and curriculum development in Australia, with an increasing focus on the experience of equity groups – defined as students who may identify as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait

Islander, from low socio-economic backgrounds, living with disability, from non-English speaking backgrounds, or from rural, regional, or remote locations (Bennett et al., 2024).

Women in non-traditional fields such as science, technology, engineering, building, or agriculture are also reflected in equity targets. But mature age women enrolled in “gender-traditional” caring fields remain underrepresented in strategic equity discussions, despite many having education pathways disrupted by caring roles or other forms of gendered exclusion. At best, women-students with caring responsibilities have been characterised as “equity-like” (Crawford, 2022). In Australia, mutual obligation policies tied to income support require that women in caring roles engage with education and training opportunities on a path to paid employment (Klein, 2021). For women in these circumstances, the marketing promise of online degrees being manageable around caring responsibilities while meeting mutual obligation agreements might sound particularly attractive (Klein, 2021). As participation rates for equity groups in higher education continue to rise, the Australian Universities Accord (2024) asserts it is not sufficient to enrol underrepresented students and hope for the best. Specialised supports at all touchpoints in the student journey informed by a “whole of student” response are needed to ensure success for students positioned in equity (and equity-like) groups (Bennett et al., 2024).

In online learning environments, teacher presence has been a dominant theme for building supportive relationships and fostering a sense of connection with learners to mitigate the isolation of online study (Stone & Springer, 2019). Strong teacher presence is further implicated in multiple aspects of students’ online engagement, including patterns of behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement that contribute to student success (Lawrence et al., 2024; Redmond et al., 2018; Wang, 2024). Maintaining strong teacher presence is especially important for enhancing the online learning experience with underrepresented students who might encounter complex barriers to engagement (Lawrence et al., 2024).

Pedagogical care has become central to establishing teacher presence online, particularly by enabling educators supporting diverse cohorts. Approaches are often informed by Noddings’ (2013) emphasis on care as relational practice in educational settings that is “directed toward the welfare, protection, or enhancement of the cared-for” (p.47). For Motta and Bennett (2018, p.636), enhancing “whole of student” welfare requires recognition of the “complexities and wisdoms” that diverse learners have acquired from other experiences and exclusions in a range of life contexts. Care-full recognition thus adopts a strength-based focus on difference, and through this, pushes back on “individualised motivations and work-related outcomes” that typify neoliberal framings of student success (Motta & Bennett, 2018, p.637). Further, the authors argue that care-full dialogic approaches are crucial for building supportive teaching and learning contexts in which students can heal past injuries to their self-perceptions and confidence (Motta & Bennett, 2018). As Shor and Freire (1987) state, “dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it” (p.13). The nature of flexible online delivery requires us to think creatively about ways we can “meet” students in care-full dialogue – and importantly, how we can be present to support wellbeing during periods of self-discovery that students might find emotionally challenging (Motta & Bennett, 2018).

The abrupt pivot to online delivery during Covid-19 saw a particularly sharp rise in literature proposing ways to adapt care theory in online settings (Burke & Lamar, 2020). To date, much of the research has centred on the experiences of online teachers, or the perspectives of online students, with less attention on ways to design care-informed online learning activities. One

exception was Fisher and Wheeler's (2025) study of embedding care in ePortfolio tasks to humanise the learning experience through empathetic teaching support in synchronous and asynchronous contexts. The dialogue phase of Fisher and Wheeler's (2025) model favoured synchronous drop-in sessions to facilitate dialogic participation, which is not surprising given the value that online educators continue to place on synchronous interactions (see Burke et al., 2022; Fattore, 2022; Henriksen et al., 2022; and Kizilcik & Turudu, 2022). Fox (2025) also found a bias towards synchronous participation in their study of online teachers trying to build caring relationships with mature age students online. Participants reported a strong preference for asynchronous learning to be combined with "frequent synchronous learning opportunities...and some face-to-face meetings because they provide space to develop individual meaningful relationships and connections which are so important for establishing a caring environment" (Fox, 2025, p.131). Their sentiment is plausible but overlooks the point that synchronous participation and face-to-face meetings can be barriers to education for some.

Greer (2023) notes the lack of pedagogical care research in asynchronous delivery, arguing that "the asynchronous learning environment is where critical/liberatory and care pedagogies should be even more consciously applied because of the removal in space and time of the learner from the instructor" (p.1). Holding synchronicity as the preferred (or only) way to construct relations online can reinforce structural barriers to higher education in the form of meetings or classes that might placate the preference of teachers, but exclude students who cannot attend (Greer, 2023). Like most authors writing from a care perspective, Burke et al. (2022) recognise the value of leveraging technology to enhance a sense of human connection, establish presence, display personality, and convey authenticity, but acknowledge that not all learners will benefit from such interactions if they cannot, or choose not to participate, hence a wider lens on engagement is needed. As Burke and Lamar (2021) state, "caring dialogue in online contexts requires opportunities for meaningful discussion through multiple modes, synchronously and asynchronously" (p. 608).

In response, the central aim of my action research was to bridge the synchronous/ asynchronous divide with inclusive, care-centred teaching and learning design that did not preference a particular view of what engagement should look like to be characterised as meaningful. The novel aspect was to engage students *in a single, dialogic learning activity each week, with multiple ways to participate in that single activity on their own terms* – which differs from the dominant online learning design approach to offering multiple *types* of online activities for learners to engage with (Robinson et al. 2020). Multiple types of activities are important, but the argument here is for drawing students into the rhythm of one main class discussion each week that takes time to develop, has multiple ways to join the conversation, with multiple modes of embedding caring teacher presence across synchronous and asynchronous sites of learning.

Research Questions and Conceptual Frame

The study was driven by two key questions:

How can pedagogical care inform dialogic online teaching and learning design for synchronous and asynchronous contexts?

In what ways can care-centred online teaching and learning design help diverse learners build confidence to participate in critical class dialogue with peers and teachers?

The questions were guided by a conceptual framing of pedagogical care online that could:

1. “Take care seriously – as a rigorous and iteratively re/developed ethics of mutuality, relationality, and difference” (Motta & Bennett, 2018, p.640).
2. Understand the gendered contours of (low)confidence impacting women with lived experience as an equity-like group and hold space for active consciousness raising and self-compassion through care-full dialogue and care-full recognition (Hatfield & Hodgson, 2025; Motta & Bennett, 2018; Stone & O’Shea, 2019a).
3. “Exercise visible, intentional care in forming relationships between students, teachers, and course content via online learning platforms” (Burke et al., 2022, p.289).

This framing has an applied core that resonates with notions of compassion in higher education (Andrew et al., 2023). For example, Killingback et al. (2024) propose a working definition of compassionate pedagogy that actively entails a process of noticing suffering, distress, or disadvantage, and taking action to remediate it in some way to promote wellbeing and flourishing. There is a lovely synergy between this definition and my broader research objective to identify the pain points for diverse learners online and redress them wherever possible.

Standpoint Statement

As a first in family mature age student myself with caregiving responsibilities, I recognise the struggles my students navigate on their education journey. As a social worker, I am committed to nurturing skilled practitioners capable of practicing effectively with vulnerable citizens in challenging service contexts. Assisting students to develop reflective skills and find their advocacy voice is even more critical in the new era of Artificial Intelligence infiltrating professional decision-making in human service contexts (Hodgson et al., 2022). I share this to situate my care for student outcomes, for groups and individuals they might work with, for human service professions and ethical practice standards, for my teaching colleagues grappling with student engagement challenges, and my self-care for constantly re-inventing ways to find joy in my teaching practice against the swell of fast education “on demand.” The care-full teaching approaches described in this paper have been recognised at the University and national levels with teaching citations. I share them here for a wider audience, should they be of value to others. As Dharma teacher Matthew Brensilver would say, pick up what’s useful and leave the rest behind.

Methods

The study was approved by the university’s Human Research Ethics Committee (#204828). To address ethical considerations of power in student-teacher relations (Symonds, 2020), I investigated third year capstone courses to reduce the likelihood that I would be teaching students again (in their current program) and minimise any future impact on student-teacher dynamics. No adverse events were reported. On the contrary, students reported feeling valued (and validated) by participating in the study. The critical action research methodology (Kemmis et al., 2014) was designed to investigate student experiences of online learning as they intersected with my experience of online teaching, through which we co-designed the dialogic learning activity.

Table 1***Sample and Data Collection***

Research Stage	Sample Population	Data Collection
Stage one	120 students enrolled in two x third year online human services courses running concurrently in 2023 at an Australian university	anonymous online student survey (n23) student co-design focus group (n7) student course and teacher evaluation feedback (n32) course analytics and reflective teacher journal (n120/whole of cohort observation)
Stage Two	135 students enrolled in subsequent offerings of the same two courses in 2024	anonymous online student survey (n22) student focus group (n6) student course and teacher evaluation feedback (n31) course analytics and reflective teacher journal (n135/whole of cohort observation)

The thought of a reflective teacher journal initially felt like an “add on” to my priority of promoting student voice through focus groups and qualitative survey responses. I toyed with the prospect of journaling my observations as data because I struggle with the idea that course analytics can usefully evaluate online engagement. Course analytics paint a limited picture (to me) of how online students approach their studies vis-à-vis behavioural engagement with resources (whether they complete them, or not), and cognitive engagement gauged by assessment outcomes (also flawed without knowing how students prepare their assessment tasks). Collecting the observation data as a reflective teacher journal enabled my own commentary on “what was actually happening” (Tight, 2022, p.150) in terms of how students’ emotional and social engagement appeared to be developing through class discussions (Redmond et al., 2018).

The data were thematically coded in three stages using Riessman’s (2008) matrix of narrative analysis for reflexively interrogating “what” was said or observed, “how” narratives were co-produced, and “who” the dialogue was co-produced with. First level coding identified five main themes of (low)confidence, participation, connectedness, student-teacher interaction and affect narratives that informed second level coding for patterns within each grouping. Third level coding reduced the number of sub-themes and organised data into dominant patterns that aligned with the research questions. This was a key step in managing the data because student conversations had veered off in numerous directions, and not wanting to overlook anything, my observations followed them. I engaged trusted colleagues as “critical friends” to read the transcripts and pick up (or challenge) any aspects of the coding stages that I might have misread or overlooked (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2020).

Results

Stage One: What Needed to Change and Why

Prior to stage one data collection, the two options for participating in online class discussions were 1/ succinct written responses to a specific question aligned to a weekly subtopic (typically three per week, attracting less than 20% participation), and 2/ a weekly synchronous video conferencing (Zoom) call facilitated by teaching staff (averaging 8% participation). The training instructions for online teachers in my unit stipulate the nature of Zoom calls should be “drop-in style” whereby students can drop-in, ask questions or clarification, usually around assessment tasks, and leave as it suits them (timetabled online tutorial classes are not considered an option; the rationale is that timetabling online classes contradicts the flexible model and can disadvantage those who cannot attend). Zoom drop-ins were recorded and stored in the course media folder if students wished to view them, and most did not: less than 10% were viewing recordings, with average viewing time less than 10% completion. In sum, participation was low across all options for engaging with class discussions, despite Zoom sessions consistently receiving positive student feedback in course evaluation data from those who attended.

Stage one student survey and focus group data revealed multiple ways that low confidence was impacting participation in class discussions, whether in synchronous Zoom calls, or written asynchronous forum activities. Students valued the idea of synchronous class conversations but were reluctant to attend drop-in style sessions for fear of being put on the spot, not feeling prepared, and not knowing what to say; most of which stemmed from self-doubt in comprehending material, not knowing which material might be in focus, and feeling overwhelmed at the thought of covering everything “just in case.” Flowing downstream from this, students said they felt uncomfortable watching “awkward” Zoom drop-in recordings of peers who were “clearly nervous and not prepared”, which made viewers feel even more reluctant to join in person. Other barriers to participating in synchronous sessions were more predictable in terms of timing and competing responsibilities.

Low confidence was also a major barrier to joining written discussions. Students felt anxious about committing to a written response that might be “way off the mark” in terms of doubting one’s grasp of the content and critical thinking skills. Another deterrent to written activities was the volume of threads students were having trouble keeping up with which diluted the talking points and fostered a “drive by” approach to dropping posts and moving on without returning to witness how discussions were developing.

The required “solution” (tested with students in the co-design focus group) needed to 1/ draw students into the rhythm of one main dialogic conversation each week, 2/ provide clear, manageable preparation tasks, 3/ offer multiple ways for students to participate on their own terms, and 4/ ensure that conversation environments felt safe, respectful, and inclusive of diverse perspectives and learning styles.

Stage Two: Implementing the Care-full Zoom

To address the issues students identified, the “care-full Zoom” was implemented as a multi-step process (described in detail below).

0. Care-full Set Up: Pre-teaching week as foundation building
1. Care-full Zoom Preparation (asynchronous preparation tasks)
2. Care-full Zoom Facilitation (synchronous session)
3. Care-full Zoom Follow Up (asynchronous follow up activities)

Results below are illustrated with a selection of student quotes retrieved from course forum posts, course evaluation instruments, and qualitative survey responses. Student quotes are mapped to my observations of the care-full teaching approaches I deployed that perhaps informed their responses.

0. Care-full Set Up: Pre-Teaching Week

There is no requirement for teaching staff in my unit to engage students prior to week one of teaching and learning, however, I made use of the pre-teaching week to create a welcome thread in the course forum to introduce myself, what I enjoy doing outside of work, and to situate myself as practitioner, caregiver, and consumer of aged care and disability services. Included was a short video of me celebrating the different perspectives of consumer, practitioner, citizen, and student wisdom, and acknowledging the value of “beginners mind” which can be open, curious, and without limitation. I invited students to share their vantage point (to the extent they felt comfortable) to get a sense of the diversity among us. Students could see my facial expressions (if sighted), get a feel for my humour and optimism, and read my introduction, setting the scene for who they could expect to meet in Zooms, or put a face and energy to my written words throughout the course.

Student Feedback

Students described the welcome posts in the pre-teaching week as relatable, positive, down to earth, and encouraging:

So interesting to read part of your journey, thank you for sharing, it really is okay to take the long way here; wow, I've never seen so much positivity in a welcome forum, and here I am replying for the first time lol; love the acknowledgement of what we bring from everyday life, I'm already thinking about this now; I am super excited to learn more through your practical experiences; this is my first ever forum post and the first time that I have studied since 1997 with no tertiary experience at all....super nervous, but the energy so far is great!

My Observations

I tried to maintain a nuanced trauma lens and inclusive messaging in all communication. For example, I did not ask direct questions about children, pets, relationships, accommodation or similar, to emotionally protect women who might have challenges with fertility, bereavement, precarious housing and such. Instead, the personal questions were framed as “tell us your superpowers,” or “your dream side-hustle,” or “peculiar study rituals” which were all open to interpretation and “blue-sky” thinking that looked past gendered questions about family, pets and relationships (unless women wanted to raise these things). Through this, I was able to analyse strengths and uniqueness in posts from women who shared they were facing challenges of some kind. This helped set a strengths-tone for the course by openly recognising their resilience, tenacity, and host of life skills that could transfer to practice settings. This foundation was important for picking up opportunities throughout the course to challenge unhelpful narratives of self-doubt and remind students how lived experience can translate to valuable practice skills. Early on, I was able to identify some who were in the thick of navigating National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) plans or other care packages and align this to practice knowledge

(NDIS is a government-funded insurance scheme providing funded support for people with disability in Australia).

I also used the welcome thread as an opportunity to describe myself as a “reformed perfectionist” to tap into student anxieties about needing to get everything “right” which can limit participation and distract from deeper thinking (teachers know the frustration of students asking more questions about referencing and word count than course concepts). Setting a tone of “perfection recovery” helped smash the myth that teachers are all-knowing and set the scene for a co-learning environment that mimicked reflective practice in the field. Establishing this early created touch points throughout the course to revisit and embrace our learning as a work in progress, the teacher included.

1. Care-full Zoom Preparation

One week before each weekly Zoom session I posted preparation tasks in the course forum (one small reading, one big idea to reflect on) and invited students to bring practical examples from their everyday lives as consumers of human services, or practitioners in the sector, or alternate perspectives from those in neutral spaces. Each week I set the scene with a brief example from my world as a consumer/practitioner that mapped to the weekly topic. Care-full preparation helped students feel more confident to participate by knowing precisely what (content), and who (teacher presence) to expect which motivated them to complete readings and share their own examples.

Student Feedback

Students said the Zoom preparation posts made the material “seem do-able” and “much less daunting.” They described how the structure helped them map out an independent study plan, in contrast to other online experiences where they felt quite lost and developed habits of avoiding material that felt overwhelming. Students appreciated the encouragement to bring examples from all corners of daily life and felt comfortable knowing I would bring examples to keep the discussion flowing as needed to avoid any prolonged awkward silences. Importantly, students reported increased motivation to complete readings with a Zoom coming up, whether attending in real time or viewing recordings:

This teaches content in such a relatable way; creates an energy within me for exploring the ideas and seeing how they apply to my own situation and the world around me; feels much less daunting; I’m more likely to complete readings or watch lectures when I have a Zoom coming up.

My Observations

One of the key conditions for enhancing online engagement that Lawrence et al. (2024) outlined was the provision of well-structured and interesting content. In this context, well-structured meant clear, realistic, manageable reading tasks assigned to accessible texts that could serve as a launchpad to further exploration and not bamboozle students from the outset. “Interesting” content seemed evident in student feedback about aligning material to everyday life, my personal examples, making the links between theory and practice more accessible, and clear signposting of the alignment to assessment tasks. The celebration of examples from our own unique vantage point bolstered student confidence to participate because there were no “wrong” answers, and students felt their experience was valued (as observed in forum discussions and survey responses).

2. Care-full Zoom Facilitation

Teachers will have their own tool kits and skill sets for managing group dynamics and facilitating class discussions. What I did differently in these sessions was talk to the *whole* class at regular intervals *as though they were present* (not just the students in attendance). This took some practice, and I used notes to remind me of names and special interests garnered from forum posts that I could mention, or I would put general questions to “viewers” and ask them to respond in the follow up thread. I did this in the hope that those watching the recording later might feel involved in the conversation to offset some of the isolation of online learning. I also set the Zoom display to “gallery view” so all participants appeared on the screen at the same time, lest single “speaker view” might feel daunting and deter people from participating.

Student Feedback

Students often describe the value of hearing practice experiences from social work educators, as did my students. They appreciated (and learned to instigate) my candid reflections on things like managing ethical dilemmas, broaching difficult workplace conversations, and professional networking to help find “best possible” solutions (reinforcing that perfect solutions are often out of reach in human service work). Recurring themes in student feedback were trust, safety, and confidence in relation to expanding critical thinking, and a deep sense of practical learning while having fun:

She has so much practice knowledge to share but encouraged students to share their own lived experiences; motivates me to learn more and instils belief; helps push me outside my comfort zone and trust it will be ok; makes you feel cared for and supported while challenging you and asking big questions; pushes our limits so we have to think beyond the subject matter to a practical sense of how the theories can be applied which has made my online learning experience ever so practical; took you further into actually doing the jobs in the aging and disability sectors rather than just concentrating on theory. Her passion for the course material in all walks of life is contagious and makes me enthusiastic to embrace the course content.

My Observations

It took some effort to be mindful of not “overdoing it” or “trying too hard” in these Zoom sessions. I could feel my energy rising each time I had a “precious” synchronous opportunity to display personality, warmth, humour, and encouragement – and needed to keep it in check – while trying to foster critical discussions, demystify tricky concepts, and be mindful of including everyone. That is a lot to manage at once, along with general housekeeping reminders and other things to remember. If I did muck something up, I would acknowledge it and quip that “luckily I’m in perfection recovery” (either during the session, or in my follow up post). This type of good humour made for a light-hearted learning environment while keeping the thread of self-compassion visible. If students became stuck on negative self-talk, or pessimistic views of human service failures, I would acknowledge their viewpoints but ensure that conversations ended with a solution-focused, onward leading tone. This was not always easy to manage with people rightfully frustrated by systems that fail consumers (and practitioners) of ageing and disability services, but important for fostering emotional wellbeing and resilience for future practice.

3. Care-full Zoom Follow Up

Standard practice in my unit is to have Zoom drop-in recordings automatically upload to a course media folder where the onus is on students to seek them out if interested. The media folder is accessible through a navigation pane where the link to recordings is not particularly prominent. Instead, I managed recordings manually and posted them as a pinned thread in the course forum to increase visibility, ease of access, and extend a warm invitation to view. Rather than having to search and click through six buttons to find a nameless recording in the media folder with no description, students were now presented with a recording link as a visual thumbnail of the class in action (with faces displayed in gallery view) whenever they accessed the landing page, accompanied by a description and an invitation to view. Students also received the recording link in the daily email digest of forum posts (meaning that a recording could be accessed on a smartphone email account with one click). The video posts contained a (brief) summary of the content, rough timestamps to guide busy people to key moments, key talking points to build on, statement of relevance to assessment tasks, and a request for viewers to post their thoughts and contributions after viewing. The written follow up posts in the course forum became dynamic, inclusive spaces to keep the conversation going and share additional resources between the whole class, not just those who attended the Zoom. Care-full follow up transformed Zoom recordings from a passive learning tool to a critical lever for connecting students with each other, with course content, and with teachers.

Student Feedback

Students said that watching recordings felt like a “real” classroom whereby they felt connected and included and looked forward to it each week. While not planned for, the follow up posts also proved beneficial for neurodiverse students who were able to process information in the class discussion on their own terms before contributing to the follow up thread:

Watching recordings felt like a real classroom where I got connected with my teacher and fellow students; as a person with disability, being able to post after watching the zoom is making studying accessible to me; I appreciate the dedication to creating an inclusive atmosphere where everyone feels part of the conversation; makes you feel you are not alone and isolated while studying online; so cool how she talked to us as if we were there, I heard my name more than once, that got my attention lol.

My Observations

When crafting the follow up posts, I chose language that would (hopefully) convey the same warmth and encouragement from the synchronous sessions to the asynchronous written posts – again taking care not to “overdo it” and being mindful of the line between encouraging and exhausting people (knowing that people will mark the line in different places). It was also important to let conversations develop after my initial post and not rush back in with responses that might disrupt the flow of peer-to-peer discussion – I tried to strike a balance between maintaining presence and staying out of the way, when useful to do so.

Whether in my initial post, or as discussion developed, I would also reflect on my own “personal learning of the week” and invite students to do the same. This was valuable for generating a range of candid posts about how people were feeling about understanding content, applying theory in practice, raising fears about future practice, not feeling confident in skills for practice, and concerns about job interviews or not having a competitive resumé – all of which we systematically addressed with additional workshops and resources based on student-identified needs.

Importantly, the follow up posts also generated a contagious tone of self-compassion and reframed a can-do attitude, perhaps partly due to my borrowing of Cormac Russell's (2016) basic but powerful instruction to shift our mind-set from "what's wrong to what's strong", which students enthusiastically bought into.

Summary of Engagement Outcomes

Implementing the care-full Zoom saw a marked improvement with engagement patterns. Total participation in one substantive weekly class discussion rose from a course average of 8% to 53% (comprised of attending Zooms, viewing recordings, and contributing to the forum thread in which recordings were posted) – a significant increase given that participation is voluntary. In addition, engagement with the general course forum overall (where recordings are posted) doubled to 83% total course average, whereas average participation in subtopic activities was 24%. This suggests that general course forums may be underutilised as sites for critical online teaching and learning opportunities, particularly in language rich disciplines like human service work. That said, student feedback indicated that some simply did not want to engage directly with peers and teachers at all, but they appreciated learning through reading posts of others, so a vibrant, care-full, asynchronous discussion space was crucial for including them on their own terms.

While the care-full approach to implementing three stages of Zoom activities had clearly improved student engagement with class discussions tied to course content, I did not anticipate the nuanced ways these discussions could inspire students to interact and grow beyond weekly subject matter. Students grew increasingly comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities relating to graduate transitions in the forum threads. Analysing student posts enabled me to facilitate additional Zoom workshops that were responsive to students' needs, despite being outside of the curriculum and not tied to course learning objectives. The workshops included job searching, skill mapping, resumé writing, interview coaching, and any references I could provide. Workshop content was also tailored to those seeking non-paid employment pathways. The career support that students have access to at the university is very generalised, students appreciated having discipline specific transition support *within* course teaching as seen in the email excerpts below that I received from students after course completion:

I always think, I am a Muslim woman with not much English, my age, and zero work experience/confidence, how will I ever be able to find a suitable job, employers aren't looking for someone like me, but the way you approached teaching turned that around for me, there is always something good hidden.

Being a high school dropout, university was so daunting, I'm so grateful for how you support students beyond teaching, thank you for being my referee, in the interview I felt you reminding me of everything we talked about, and I nailed it!

As a more mature age student, I really appreciate the affirmation that our learning can be used in everyday life not just paid work because I'm hoping to volunteer in residential aged care in my country town when I retire, and this has really helped me plan for that.

In conversation with students, I also learned more about the challenges for designing field learning components with online learners. There is an understandable push for online human service degrees to incorporate fieldwork (see Banham, 2020), however, compulsory field components can exclude students with caregiving responsibilities (Cowan & Robinson, 2023). The focus on

paid employment trajectories also reinforces hegemonic notions of higher education transforming students into “successful” middle-class subjects through the institutional logic of career development (Motta & Bennett, 2018). The diversity in my cohorts reflects that some students are ready to embark on careers, some are dabbling in the idea, and some are just not in situations conducive to employment at present. To frame paid employment as the “successful” graduate pathway does not honour the diversity of all learning achievements, including important learning outcomes students have reported in terms of learning how to negotiate improvements to their own (or their child/partner’s) NDIS disability support plans as a consumer (also a vital factor for edging closer to career readiness, if that is the goal). The value of volunteering as a graduate pathway also needs to be honoured given the global policy rhetoric of independent living and ageing in place, knowing that the burden of community care universally falls to women in unpaid roles (World Health Organization, 2024).

Enabling education is often associated with bridging programs that support equity students in transitioning to higher education pathways (Davis et al., 2023). However, participants in this study were third year students nearing (or at) the completion of their online degrees, many of whom still felt “wobbly” after three years of study and unsure about their transitions after graduating. Supporting students beyond the curriculum, but within their program in discipline specific ways promotes a wider lens on enabling approaches. Providing “in-course” support from a trusted ally speaks to Bennett et al.’s (2024) key enablers of equity, particularly the inclusive lens on what “successful” participation in higher education looks like from multiple vantage points.

Discussion

Burke et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of supporting students to engage online to ensure student success and retention. Further, the authors recognise a need to understand “some of the less-measurable elements of the online student-teacher relationship” that students find valuable when studying online (Burke et al., 2022, p.288).

My humble contribution to exploring the “less-measurables” involved mapping the teacher qualities that students expressed to my corresponding teaching behaviours, with a view to understanding practical care approaches that might pair with student success. Indicators of online teacher presence were evident in the recurring words students used to evaluate my teaching, often referring to my “charisma” in concert with other descriptors like reliable, flexible, supportive, safe, encouraging, warm, fun, relatable, authentic, empathetic, understanding, and down to earth. The learning outcomes students attributed to my teaching qualities included greater confidence, heightened critical thinking, building a diversity mind-set, and a strengths-based framing of lived experience – coupled with deeper self-awareness about the importance of locating one’s own worldview in person-centred human service practice (McDonnell & Wayland, 2024).

The term “X factor” was used in the study by Burke et al. (2022, p.288) to capture a range of undefined educator qualities that were evident in aspects of their class interactions and course design and delivery. Thinking about this “X factor” of online teaching qualities piqued my interest in “charisma” as one of the recurring descriptors that students used in my study. The framing of charismatic teaching is complex, but according to Queen (2023), one effective tactic of charismatic leaders is the use of humour, repetition, and sharing of one’s own transformational experiences. Henry and Thorsen (2018) suggest that teachers using self-disclosure can benefit

student learning in numerous ways, often through teachers sharing stories about themselves that increase students' attention and motivation to engage.

While not a deliberate tactic (that I was aware of), the data illustrate several ways I was planting seeds of self-disclosure – ranging from my candid personal introduction in pre-teaching week, to personal examples of the types of reflections students could bring to Zoom sessions, and practice reflections from the field. I was also sharing more subtle elements of my own personal growth, such as letting go of perfectionism, laughing at my procrastination strategies, learning a new skill, or rethinking a viewpoint from a new perspective. On reflection, my snippets of self-disclosure were also typically embedded with self-compassion for my own vulnerabilities and continuous learning journey. I say snippets, because the key here was working with self-disclosure as a conversation *starter* relevant to a specific context, not as a monologue of personal story telling more broadly (McDonnell & Wayland, 2024). During all stages of the care-full Zoom, I was preparing notes ahead of time, bringing personal examples, and reflecting on personal learning tied to the weekly topic (or assessment tasks), but moving swiftly to invite student responses – which often gave rise to impromptu “personal skills audits” and rehearsing our go-to class affirmation of shifting perspectives from “what’s wrong to what’s strong” (Russell, 2016).

Modelling self-compassion through well-chosen threads of self-disclosure helped students focus on their own strengths, “encouraging a more kind, compassionate and caring inner voice through re-framing thoughts and experiences” (Hatfield & Hodgson, p.11). The benefits of this were apparent in student narratives about personal growth, and in the process, re/claiming confidence for future practice. The time I invested in sensitively constructing personal narratives to share with students was initially to create a warm, safe learning environment. But through getting to “know” me, my practice approaches, my successes and failures, students could begin to see themselves in practice, ways they might manage ethical dilemmas, and how they might leverage their lived experiences to empathise with groups and individuals in practice settings. In this way, the teacher not only offers pastoral care, but they also become part of the lesson (Fox & Wayland, 2020).

Although I have not been able to attend a zoom in real time, I always watch them back. She is so connected to the content and the course and committed to supporting the students, I feel like I know her so well. Her ability to connect to people she hasn't met is fabulous. (student feedback, course evaluation data)

Elsewhere I have written about the importance of teachers “knowing” equity learners online (see Jarldorn & Rowe, 2026), but here it seems equally important for online students to “know” their teacher through the asynchronous content to feel connected.

According to Segev and Hochman (2022), modelling self-disclosure as a professional skill invites students to expand their own self-awareness and learn how to use self-disclosure appropriately when working with clients. Yet the authors note that self-disclosure is noticeably absent in social work and human service education, likely due to a lack of pedagogical interrogation.

McDonnell and Wayland (2024) concur that social work and human service fields do not receive formal training in self-disclosure and are in fact discouraged from sharing personal stories with client groups, despite the recognition that lived experience (when used appropriately) can strengthen therapeutic alliances. In my study, the relational practices of self-compassion and self-disclosure were clearly strengthening teaching and learning alliances. I have now come to view a pedagogy of self-disclosure as not being separate to, but in fact a vital part of exercising

pedagogical care. However, utilising self-disclosure requires us to care-fully reflect on the appropriateness of our approaches as they intersect with diversity, culture, context, language, trauma, and professional boundaries (Segev & Hochman, 2022), all of which can be heightened in online environments and experienced differently by students. It also requires us to reflexively position relational dialogue as a site of co-learning, not as a tactic “to make students our friends”, which would render dialogue a technique for manipulation rather than illumination (Shor & Freire, 1987, p.13). Understanding this in the teaching and learning context also presents opportunities to formally discuss the ethical boundaries of self-disclosure in practice contexts with students (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020).

Analysing my patterns of self-disclosure showed me where and how I was usefully serving as a window to the profession *and* modelling personal growth. But I also found some inconsistencies in my messaging. On one hand, I was instructing students about self-care in practice and setting professional boundaries, yet I was answering student posts in the course forum that were routinely timestamped anywhere between 6am and 11pm. This alerted me that self-disclosure involves more than sharing stories about oneself in narrative form. We are constantly telling students something about us through our actions, and I was telling students that I lacked skills in setting time boundaries! Exercising pedagogical care online does not require us to be online around the clock just because our students are. Setting (and maintaining) boundaries can be challenging when we want to maintain strong teacher presence and be there to support students when they reach out, often out of hours (Stone & Springer, 2019).

Burke et al. (2022) acknowledge how time intensive it is to exercise pedagogical care online, arguing the need to leverage technology wherever possible to enact care at multiple touchpoints of online engagement. The care-full Zoom has demonstrated several novel ways to leverage technology with online learners. During care-full facilitation, speaking to the whole class (not just those in attendance) seemed particularly novel to students who watched recordings after, as did “throwing down the challenge” for all to join the conversation in the follow up post. In the care-full follow up stage, moving the Zoom recording from a course media folder to a forum thread might sound rather basic, but to date, I am not aware of colleagues transforming Zoom recordings in this way from a passive learning resource to an active dialogic tool.

According to Shor and Freire (1987, p.14), “dialogue is the sealing together of the teacher and students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study”, but a dialogic setting does not mean that everyone must speak (or write, in the case of asynchronous dialogue). The inclusive properties of the care-full Zoom were noted by students who did not participate in verbal *or* written discussions yet still gained valuable reflective insight from watching recordings and reading follow up posts. I do hold concerns for wellbeing if students choose to navigate deepening self-awareness alone, so I try to mitigate this with brief recordings, posts, and resources for practicing self-care in online study that intersects with lived experience.

Overall, the research presented here points to ways we can become more deliberate with our teaching choices. Or as Burke and Larmar (2021) propose, to become more intentional and theoretically informed in how we position care in online learning – knowing that we can only do so much to design an optimal online learning environment, and the choice to participate is ultimately up to students.

Implications for Future Research

In the flexible delivery environment I practice in, formative learning activities like the care-full Zoom are not compulsory which will always limit the reach and scope of the approaches detailed in this paper. The only compulsory touchpoint in many online courses is summative assessment submission. Future studies could usefully explore ways to embed pedagogical care and establish relational dialogue with all students through summative assessment design. Care-full summative assessments incorporating lived experience could also support a shift away from problematic neoliberal notions of authentic assessment that are tied to future work and job-readiness as the successful outcome of higher education (Timperley & Schick, 2025).

As enrolment numbers in online courses continue to grow, obvious questions of scalability and sustainability for care-full teaching arise (Burke et al., 2022). Pietersen (2024) argues that the responsibility to offer an online space of care is largely left up to the teacher but should be institutionalised to address questions of equity. I can attest that while general online learning design may explore “set and forget” timesaving technologies, care-full teaching often feels more akin to “rinse and repeat.” The emotional labour of re/making relationships every ten weeks, four terms a year, is very demanding and not reflected in workload models. As Burke et al. (2022) remind us, “care-centred online teaching cannot be automated” (p.296). Larger cohorts also require larger teaching teams often comprised of casual teaching staff whose training tends to fall to the course coordinator/lecturer in an ad hoc manner, adding further workload considerations. Future research must hold institutions to account for recognising and resourcing care-centred teaching practice given the unique role it can play in student retention and meeting equity targets.

Conclusion

Implementing the care-full Zoom showed clear links between pedagogical care, student engagement, and student success at multiple touchpoints of online teaching and learning. However, such outcomes rely on the energy, skills, and commitment of care-full teachers to establish and maintain strong teacher presence. The relational practice of building connections online and learning together requires a composite view of engagement that cannot easily be measured by “hits” on learning resources or log-ins. Social and emotional engagement is particularly important for supporting (and retaining) lived experience learners – and the time intensive emotional labour that caring teachers take on outside the curriculum needs to be valued, recognised, and resourced by the institutions that benefit from it. The importance of this will continue to escalate with growing numbers of equity and equity-like groups now enjoying greater access to higher education through flexible online study options.

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