

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Building adaptable learners beyond content delivery: Using care ethics to foster emotional engagement and course completion in online learning

Phoebe Lake, Sarah Hattam, Amanda Carter

Adelaide University

This research investigates online teaching strategies to reduce non-completion of online courses by exploring students' emotional experiences and implementing support interventions grounded in care ethics principles. Using action research across three cycles in an introductory accounting course at an Australian university, this study investigates how teachers can effectively address emotional engagement in online learning to enhance student engagement and improve course completion rates. Student voices gathered through interviews, surveys, and feedback revealed emotional patterns that guided the development of targeted interventions, including personalised communication, time management support and extra assessment preparation sessions. These interventions incorporated four key elements of caring relationships: attention, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Data analysis employed thematic analysis of qualitative data, supported by descriptive statistics of engagement metrics and academic performance indicators. Findings demonstrate that care ethics-based interventions significantly improved student engagement, academic outcomes and course completion rates. Students recognised and valued teacher care, confirming that supportive relationships increase online course completion. However, competing life responsibilities hinder students' ability to engage with support interventions. The research establishes that effective online education requires integrated strategies combining caring teacher-student relationships with institutional support to accommodate diverse student circumstances and complex life contexts.

Keywords: care ethics, online education, emotional engagement, academic persistence, course completion, teacher presence, action research

Introduction

Online education has transformed higher education delivery globally, yet ongoing issues with student engagement and course completion persist (Greenland & Moore, 2022). This study examines online course non-completion through the lens of care ethics, recognising that addressing emotional experiences and caring relationships is essential for supporting learning persistence and fostering adaptable learners in online learning environments. Understanding the complex interaction between students' emotional experiences and course completion through supportive relationships is vital for crafting effective retention strategies (Fanshawe et al., 2020; Rowe et al., 2024).

Care ethics provides a compelling theoretical framework emphasising supportive relationships through four components: attention, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness to student needs (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1998). Unlike cognitive or behavioural interventions, this approach positions emotional experiences as fundamental to student persistence in online learning environments.

The Online Engagement Framework (OEF) offers a theoretical foundation for understanding how students interact with online learning environments (Redmond et al., 2018). Within this framework, emotional engagement serves as a catalyst for other forms of participation, with students who feel emotionally connected to their online learning experience demonstrating higher levels of cognitive engagement and academic persistence (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). The OEF shares significant alignment with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000), particularly in recognising the multidimensional nature of online engagement and the critical role of teacher presence in fostering meaningful learning experiences. Combined with care ethics principles, these frameworks suggest that supportive teacher-student relationships can provide a foundation for fostering emotional engagement and increasing course completion.

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Teacher presence is vital in fostering emotional engagement and promoting resilience in online environments (Caskurlu et al., 2020; Garrison et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2018). Effective teacher presence encompasses relationship building and emotional support through attention to student needs, competence in providing support, and responsiveness to their concerns, which reduces anxiety and isolation while increasing students' sense of belonging (Dulfer et al., 2024; Kong et al., 2025).

Despite increasing awareness of the role of emotions in learning, limited research has examined how specific teaching strategies can effectively address the emotional needs of diverse online students to help them complete their courses. This research addresses these gaps by investigating the emotional experiences of online students and evaluating targeted support interventions designed to enhance course completion rates. The study aims to identify effective teaching strategies that recognise and respond to the emotional dimensions of online learning through supportive relationships and to develop adaptable online learners.

This research was conducted within a fully online introductory accounting course at an Australian University serving a diverse cohort of non-traditional adult learners, who are employed full-time or part-time, and manage significant family and caregiving responsibilities alongside their studies (Greenland & Moore, 2022).

Literature review

Care ethics in educational contexts

Care ethics emerged as a moral framework that emphasises relationships, context, and emotional responsiveness over abstract principles of justice (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1998). In educational contexts, care ethics focuses on the quality of relationships between educators and students, emphasising the teacher's moral responsibility to attend to students' needs and respond with competence and commitment (Noddings, 2013). Tronto (1998) identifies four components of caring relations in education: attention (recognising and responding to students' expressed needs), responsibility (accepting accountability for responding to those needs), competence (having the knowledge and skills to respond effectively), and responsiveness (ensuring that care is received and recognised by students). These components provide a framework for understanding how teachers can create supportive learning environments that support student success, particularly in addressing emotional barriers to course completion.

Research in traditional educational settings has demonstrated the importance of supportive teacher-student relationships for student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Velasquez et al., 2013). However, the application of care ethics principles in online learning environments remains underexplored, despite the particular challenges of isolation and disconnection that online students face. The transition to online learning environments presents unique challenges for establishing supportive relationships between teachers and students, including physical separation, reduced opportunities for synchronous interaction, and reliance on technology-mediated communication (Ong & Quek, 2023; Tackie, 2022). Despite these challenges, research suggests that effective teacher presence can be established in online environments through intentional communication practices, responsiveness to student needs, and the creation of emotionally supportive learning communities (Richardson et al., 2017).

Online engagement framework and care ethics integration

The conceptual framework for online engagement developed by Redmond et al. (2018) provides a comprehensive understanding of how students interact with online learning environments through five distinct yet interconnected dimensions: social, cognitive, behavioural, collaborative, and emotional engagement. This multidimensional framework acknowledges that online student engagement uniquely manifests compared to traditional face-to-face learning, necessitating specifically tailored pedagogical approaches and support structures (Redmond et al., 2018). When viewed through a care ethics lens, this framework's emphasis on emotional engagement aligns with the foundational importance of caring relationships in educational contexts.

Previous studies demonstrate how these engagement dimensions interact dynamically in online learning environments, with emotional engagement often influencing other forms of participation (Gu et al., 2025; Martin et al., 2018). Students who feel emotionally connected to their online learning demonstrate higher cognitive engagement and academic persistence (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Redmond et al., 2018). This finding

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

confirms the importance of emotional support mechanisms to enhance course completion rates and student success in online learning environments.

Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) have established that emotions are not merely a background condition for learning but are fundamentally intertwined with cognitive processes and decision-making in educational contexts. Students' emotional states influence attention, memory formation, and recall, which are crucial to a successful learning experience (Tyng et al., 2017). When students feel cared for through teacher attention, competence, and responsiveness, positive emotional engagement enhances cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills, while emotional disengagement can hinder these essential learning processes (Pekrun et al., 2017; Tyng et al., 2017).

Research has shown that emotional engagement is a significant predictor of academic persistence in the context of online course completion (Guo et al., 2025; Miao & Ma, 2022). Students who maintain positive emotional connections to their learning experience are more likely to overcome academic challenges and complete their courses (Pekrun et al., 2017). These findings are particularly relevant to the present study's investigation of student support strategies to help them complete their online courses.

Teacher presence as caring practice in online learning

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework provides insight into how increased teacher presence can be implemented as a caring practice to foster adaptable online learning communities (Caskurlu et al., 2020; Garrison et al., 2000). From a care ethics perspective, teacher presence can be understood as a manifestation of care, involving attention to student needs, responsibility for their learning and wellbeing, competence in providing support, and responsiveness to their expressed concerns (Anderson et al., 2001; Thompson, 2018).

Teacher presence has emerged as a vital factor in enhancing emotional engagement and promoting resilience in online learning environments (Caskurlu et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2018). Effective teacher presence extends beyond content delivery to relationship building and emotional support, with personalised communication reducing anxiety and isolation while cultivating resilient learning communities (Anderson et al., 2001; Dulfer et al., 2024).

Proactive teacher involvement and timely communication have a significant impact on students' online learning experiences, helping to create supportive learning environments that enable learners to develop resilience in the face of competing demands (Caskurlu et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2025). Effective teacher presence creates emotionally safe environments where students feel valued, understood, and supported, enabling them to develop the adaptive capacity necessary for successful course completion despite external pressures (Cutri et al., 2020). Hence, the strategic implementation of teacher presence supports emotional engagement and builds resilient and adaptable online learning communities (Caskurlu et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2017).

While previous studies have confirmed the importance of emotional support for course completion and that teacher presence is an effective strategy to enhance emotional engagement, limited research demonstrates teacher presence as a strategy to achieve course completion through effective emotional engagement. Moreover, there is considerable scope for understanding the context in delivering this strategy effectively, taking into account the diverse needs of different student groups in online learning environments.

Research objectives

This research seeks to improve online course completion rates and academic outcomes by developing teaching strategies that recognise and systematically address students' emotional experiences in online learning environments. The study explores how intentional teacher presence, demonstrated through targeted interventions, can overcome emotional barriers that lead to course non-completion. Central to this investigation is understanding that emotional engagement represents a dynamic process that can be fostered through teaching practices grounded in care ethics (Martin et al., 2018; Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1998). Rather than treating emotions as background conditions, this research positions them as fundamental determinants of student persistence and academic success.

Existing research has predominantly examined general online populations without addressing the distinct needs of non-traditional adult learners who navigate complex competing life responsibilities alongside their

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

educational pursuits (Greenland & Moore, 2022). This study addresses these gaps by investigating how students' lived experiences can inform teaching interventions that respond to their specific circumstances. Through this approach, the research contributes to understanding how care ethics principles can be operationalised to create inclusive learning environments that promote academic success across diverse student groups.

Research design

The research design incorporated three cycles of action research. Action research was chosen to emphasise practical problem-solving and iterative improvement, aligning with care ethics' focus on responsiveness and attention to student needs (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Each cycle followed the traditional action research process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, with findings from each cycle informing the design of subsequent interventions. This iterative approach enabled the researcher to respond to emerging student needs and refine teaching strategies based on ongoing feedback and observed outcomes.

The research design prioritised capturing student voice through interviews, feedback and survey responses to inform the development of teaching interventions. Teacher reflections documented intervention rationales, implementation experiences, and their evaluation. The effectiveness of the intervention was assessed using student engagement data, academic performance metrics, and course completion rates. Ethical approval and participants' consent were obtained from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

The semi-structured interviews involved ten deliberately selected participants who had previously undertaken the course, including both completers and non-completers, following maximum variation principles (Patton, 2014). The interview protocol explored motivation for online study, emotional experiences in online learning, and perceptions of teaching support needs, with particular attention to experiences of care or its absence in their educational journey. Interviews were conducted via videoconferencing, lasting 30-45 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim.

The first action research cycle, conducted from February 2022 to June 2024, aimed to gather baseline data. The second and third action research cycles took place from September to December 2024 (169 students) and from April to June 2025 (212 students), respectively. Interventions were designed based on insights gained from Action Cycle 1 and then implemented in Action Cycle 2. Following Action Cycle 2, the action plans were revised based on new insights and subsequently implemented during Action Cycle 3. These interventions included weekly engagement and academic performance monitoring, along with personalised outreach, additional assessment preparation sessions, and individualised communication strategies that embodied care ethics principles. Table 1 below summarises the types of interventions and their implementation timelines in action cycles 2 and 3.

Table 1: Types of interventions and timeline

Week	1 – 6		7	8	9	10
Summative Assessment due	Online quiz No. 1 to 6			Major Assignment		Final Exam
Teacher interventions (action plans)	Weekly online quiz reminder		Assignment due reminder	Exam reminder	Exam reminder	
	Weekly check on quiz completion and result, personalised email to students			Assignment submission check*	Assignment result check**	
	Personalised email to non-, low-engagers, phone call to non-responders (each week before the Census date on Friday, Week 3)	Week 5 mid-point check, Email to non- and low-engagers	Pulse check email, offering additional support	Email to students who did not submit	Email based on the assignment results	
		Assessment bootcamp week 3 to week 9 (incorporating information of * and **)				
		implemented in Action Research Cycle 3				
	Time management support tool from Week 1 to 10 implemented in Action Research Cycle 3					

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Data Analysis

The data analysis employed a primarily qualitative approach supported by quantitative analysis, focusing on understanding students' emotional experiences and responses to interventions. Qualitative data from interviews, student feedback and survey responses underwent systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell & Clark, 2017). Initial coding centred on students' emotional experiences, perceptions of teacher care, and responses to support interventions, particularly how students perceived teachers' attention, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Teacher reflections were analysed thematically, emphasising students' responsiveness to teacher presence through various communication channels such as emails, phone calls, forum messages, and one-on-one consultations. Additionally, the analysis included student feedback and ratings of the additional learning resources introduced as part of teaching interventions (action plans), along with teacher reflections on challenges faced during implementation, and observations of student engagement patterns and academic outcomes. Quantitative data from engagement and academic performance metrics and course completion rates underwent descriptive statistical analysis to identify patterns across action research cycles.

Findings and discussions

The findings reveal students' emotional experiences and show how teaching interventions effectively enhanced their online learning experiences and academic results. The findings are organised into three main themes that align with the research aims: students' emotional experiences informing interventions, the effectiveness of teaching interventions in enhancing engagement and academic outcomes, and student responses to teacher interventions.

Students' emotional experiences informing interventions

Students consistently reported experiencing a spectrum of emotional challenges throughout their online learning journey, which provided crucial insights for developing targeted support strategies. Assessment periods emerged as particularly emotionally challenging times for students, informing the need for additional learning support during these critical phases. One participant described the heightened stress experienced: *"I feel more stress when it comes to assessments. It's quite stressful. ... Particularly when it comes to, like, around exam time."* This emotional vulnerability was further compounded for students returning to study after extended breaks, as another participant reflected: *"I would say, like I was quite nervous because I hadn't studied in such a long time, so the time period from when I finished the high school and to when I started Uni was about 10 years. So I was very, very nervous."* These emotional experiences directly informed the development of additional assessment bootcamp (preparation) sessions that demonstrated teacher competence and responsiveness to student concerns, addressing academic preparation and emotional support needs.

The isolation inherent in online learning environments fostered specific emotional needs, shaping interventions that focused on relationship-building efforts. One participant emphasised this challenge: *"especially someone from my background doing it all on my own with no support. I need that additional support."* Students articulated detailed requirements for supportive relationships that went beyond traditional academic assistance, with one participant explaining: *"it would've been helpful if I had somebody checking in on me just saying, how are you going? We know that you struggle with online learning sort of thing."* This comprehensive feedback directly informed the design of weekly engagement monitoring and personalised outreach strategies that embodied the care ethics through systematic relationship-building.

Students' positive responses to teacher communication practices validated the effectiveness of personalised intervention approaches and informed their continued implementation. For example, students expressed the motivational impact of supportive communication: *"When I get direct emails or any kind of communication from educators that is warm and friendly and encouraging, I definitely find it motivating to engage more with the content."* and *"Just recently, I got two distinctions for assignment, and they [the teaching team] actually emailed me saying, you know, like [sic] really well done on your grade. And that definitely motivated me even more because I was just like, Oh, it's being recognised."* These positive emotional responses reinforced the importance of effective teacher communication in supporting student engagement and motivation. This feedback guided the implementation of personalised communication strategies that embodied attention and responsiveness through individualised acknowledgment of student achievements.

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

The detailed emotional feedback from students also showed appreciation for well-organised learning environments that demonstrated institutional care through competent course design and delivery. One participant said: *"I had a couple of friends who have gone back and studied recently as well, and when they've asked me about my [study] experience, I've said, online is better because they structure it really well."* This feedback confirms that students recognised and valued the competence aspect of care ethics when it is effectively demonstrated through thoughtful course organisation and support systems, ultimately shaping the holistic approach to support intervention implementation.

Effectiveness of teaching interventions in enhancing engagement and academic outcomes

The teaching interventions enhanced student engagement and academic outcomes across diverse student populations. Regular engagement tracking, combined with personalised communication, established systematic opportunities for early intervention, while demonstrating attention to students' individual needs and circumstances.

Most notably, students who had previously disengaged from the course responded positively when teachers reached out with personalised emails and phone calls. These communications fostered safe spaces where many students shared detailed explanations of their personal and academic circumstances. Tracking their engagement patterns afterwards showed increased involvement with course materials and participation in learning activities following their interaction with the teachers. Students who were unable to commit to their studies were advised to withdraw from the course instead of receiving a Fail grade on their academic records.

Assessment bootcamp sessions produced strong engagement and academic outcomes by working through past assignments and exam questions. Conducted synchronously with recordings available, these sessions complemented weekly content-focused classes while demonstrating teacher competence and responsiveness to student preparation needs. The name 'assessment bootcamp' was deliberately chosen to attract more attention from students.

Comprehensive student feedback and survey responses consistently highlighted the transformative impact of these targeted interventions on learning experiences. Students provided enthusiastic responses such as: *"The session was exactly what I needed"*, *"keep doing, this is great support for students like me"* and *"I find working through similar questions one by one much more helpful than just learning via videos and content. Thank you."* These comments revealed how students recognised and valued the practical competence and personal responsiveness demonstrated through these additional teaching interventions.

Feedback on these assessment bootcamp sessions revealed consistent and positive student responses regarding the emotional impact of these interventions. Students reported significant improvements in their emotional state and confidence levels, with comments including: *"Really enjoyed today's session – thank you for taking the time to help us"*, *"It definitely alleviated stress"* and *"I feel confident with my assignment leading up to the due date."* These responses demonstrated how care ethics-based interventions effectively addressed both the academic and emotional dimensions of student learning experiences.

Academic performance data also shows strong evidence of the interventions' effectiveness among students who completed the course. The average course marks for course completers increased significantly from 67/100 in Cycle 2 to 79/100 in Cycle 3, reflecting a notable improvement that closely aligned with the implementation of more comprehensive teaching interventions. The number of students who did not complete the course also decreased from 36/169 (21.3%) in Cycle 2 to 34/211 (16.1%) in Cycle 3. This evidence suggests that the interventions have a positive influence on students' academic outcomes, although more tailored interventions remain essential for students facing more severe academic or personal challenges.

Students' recognition of caring practices extended beyond individual interactions to encompass their comprehensive evaluation of the learning environment. End-of-course evaluations revealed significant improvements in overall satisfaction, demonstrating a deep appreciation for teachers' approaches and sustained support efforts. Students articulated how caring teaching practices influenced their learning journey: *"I really like how she [the teacher] went above and beyond to make the course understandable ... Overall, these aspects combined gave me the courage and confidence to be able to do the learning tasks."* Another student emphasised the importance of feeling respected and valued: *"I felt that [teacher's name] was very*

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

approachable, especially during the assessment bootcamps, she was always ready to answer questions and never made anyone feel silly." These comprehensive responses validated how students recognised and valued the holistic approach that fostered both online learning experiences and academic achievement.

Student responses to teacher interventions

The complex interplay between students' appreciation for teacher support and their constrained capacity to engage with such support reveals fundamental tensions in online learning environments that extend beyond institutional control. While students consistently expressed appreciation for teachers' proactive outreach and support, competing life responsibilities substantially mediated their ability to respond meaningfully to these interventions, creating multifaceted barriers to academic engagement.

Online learners face external pressures that compel them to constantly balance demands on their cognitive and time resources. These pressures are most apparent through work-related challenges, such as increased workloads, job changes, and the need to juggle multiple income sources to manage rising living costs. When non-completers were contacted for feedback on why they did not complete the course, their answers consistently highlighted employment pressures as the main factor. This pattern aligns with previous research, which shows that online students often juggle complex roles beyond academics, demanding ongoing prioritisation decisions that frequently place educational goals secondary to immediate survival needs (Greenland & Moore, 2022).

In addition, inflexible assessment structures emerged as a significant issue within competing demands. Deadlines often coincided with peak periods of work or family responsibilities, adding extra stress. One student shared, *"You feel stressed, you really feel stressed because I think you've got deadlines at work and you deadlines online [study]. So you're trying to figure out which do you need to do first, because your work is your work and those deadlines can't move."* This reflection highlights the core tension between institutional demands and the realities faced by online students. Inflexible assessment structures can unintentionally increase stress and anxiety, affecting both the learning experience and academic success.

These contextual constraints operate beyond the direct influence of educational institutions and individual teachers, representing external factors that shape retention outcomes independently of institutional quality or teacher effectiveness. However, this recognition does not diminish the potential for teachers to provide learning support that can enhance the learning experience and course completion.

These challenges align with the broader literature, which identifies the complex barriers faced by online learners, including time management difficulties, and the need for enhanced institutional support systems that complement caring pedagogical approaches (Darby & Lang, 2019; Stone, 2017). The capacity for caring relationships to surpass structural limitations emerged as a significant finding throughout this research, indicating that teachers' care and emotional responsiveness can provide motivational support even when students cannot fully engage in their learning. This finding aligns with care ethics, which emphasises that effective caring involves understanding and responding to the specific needs and circumstances of individuals rather than applying standardised interventions (Noddings, 2013).

Students demonstrate remarkable adaptive capacity in navigating competing demands, developing sophisticated strategies that reflect both their commitment to learning and practical recognition of resource limitations. Their ability to distinguish between caring relationships and rigid program requirements reveals the intricate decision-making processes characteristic of adult learners in online environments. These findings challenge traditional assumptions that equate consistent participation with academic commitment or success, suggesting that adaptive and intermittent participation patterns can serve as effective self-regulation strategies rather than signs of disengagement or lack of motivation (Zimmerman, 2002).

Students' ability to maintain emotional connections with their teachers and learning community, even when their participation becomes intermittent or selective, supports research demonstrating the fundamental link between emotions and learning outcomes (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Pekrun et al., 2017). However, the contrasting patterns observed between course completers and non-completers suggest that emotional support strategies have different impacts depending on students' existing levels of engagement, academic preparedness, and the severity of their competing life pressures.

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Despite the increasing importance of caring teacher-student relationships, the persistent challenges for specific student groups reveal the limitations of relational interventions in addressing the complex barriers to online learning success. Feedback from students who ultimately did not complete their courses suggests that needs extend beyond emotional support to encompass more comprehensive institutional assistance, including enhanced technological support, improved course navigation systems, and greater flexibility in assessments. This finding reinforces the care ethics principle that effective care involves personal relationships and institutional competence in addressing diverse student needs through systematic support structures (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1998).

These insights collectively support intervention approaches that prioritise relationship-building and emotional responsiveness while simultaneously addressing structural barriers that constrain student capacity to engage with learning opportunities. The implications suggest that effective support strategies in online learning environments must adopt a dual focus: maintaining the caring relationships that provide essential emotional support while developing institutional flexibility that allows students to navigate the inevitable tensions between educational aspirations and competing life responsibilities.

Implications for educational practice

The findings provide several critical implications for the practice of online education. The research demonstrates that teacher interventions can enhance student engagement and reduce non-completion rates. The success of supportive interventions suggests that online educators can effectively implement teaching strategies by systematically attending to student needs, demonstrating competence in providing support, and responding to their concerns.

The effectiveness of proactive support strategies over reactive approaches emerges as a fundamental finding that challenges traditional student support models. Students explicitly recognised and responded positively to caring teacher practices, providing compelling evidence that care ethics principles can be successfully operationalised within digital educational contexts. The observed relationship between early engagement patterns and course outcomes necessitates early warning systems that identify at-risk students before significant disengagement occurs, enabling educators to maintain consistent attention and responsiveness during critical periods (Bañeres et al., 2023).

The research emphasises the need for support approaches tailored to diverse student demographics, recognising the complex individual circumstances that characterise contemporary online learner populations. The identification of diverse engagement patterns and emotional needs underscores the importance of developing flexible, caring support structures that adapt to varying student needs while maintaining consistent care ethics principles.

Limitations and future research directions

Several limitations of the current study warrant consideration. First, the focus on a single course in one institution limits generalisability across different disciplines and institutional contexts. The specific characteristics of accounting education and the particular demographic composition of the student cohort may influence how the teaching strategies are implemented and received. Future research should examine supportive approaches across various disciplines, institutional types, and cultural contexts to determine how care ethics principles can be adapted to diverse educational settings while maintaining their effectiveness.

Second, while the three action research cycles enabled iterative improvement and responsive implementation of teaching interventions, this timeframe may not capture longer-term trends in emotional engagement and learning outcomes. The seasonal variations observed in student responsiveness to support interventions suggest that longer longitudinal studies are needed to understand how supportive approaches develop and sustain over time. Future research could track emotional experiences and the impact of caring relationships across multiple course offerings or entire degree programs to provide deeper insights into the long-term effectiveness of care ethics in online education.

Third, the reliance on student self-reported emotional experiences and perceptions of care may not fully capture the complexity of emotional experiences in online learning or the nuanced ways students evaluate the

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

effectiveness of teachers' support. While survey responses, feedback and interviews provided rich qualitative data, future research could utilise more sophisticated measures of emotional engagement and care perception, potentially including physiological indicators, detailed learning analytics, or ethnographic approaches that capture the lived experience in online environments over extended periods.

Future research should also examine the institutional and individual costs of implementing care ethics principles in online education and identify strategies for scalable practices across larger educational contexts. While this study demonstrates the effectiveness of supportive approaches, questions remain about the sustainability and resource implications of implementing care ethics principles at scale. Research is needed to develop models for institutional support of 'teach with care' that do not overwhelm individual educators.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that care ethics-based teaching strategies effectively address emotional dimensions of online learning and help reduce course non-completion rates. The systematic implementation of teaching interventions enhanced student engagement and academic outcomes. Students' emotional experiences proved to be crucial indicators for developing support strategies, with early interventions being particularly valuable for maintaining connections and motivation.

Caring teacher-student relationships function as protective factors against non-completion, even under significant life pressures. Students recognised and valued authentic teacher care, confirming that care ethics principles can be successfully applied online through personalised communication, proactive monitoring of engagement, and responsive assessment support. Notable improvements in academic performance and completion rates across action research cycles offer strong evidence for effective teaching strategies.

However, the study identifies limitations in which purely relational approaches are insufficient to overcome the complex structural barriers faced by online learners. While caring relationships provide vital emotional and motivational support, they need to be complemented by institutional flexibility and comprehensive support systems that recognise the diverse circumstances of online students. The research underscores the need for integrated strategies that combine personalised care with systemic changes to assessment structures, technological support, and course delivery.

These findings establish care ethics as a practical framework for understanding and addressing challenges related to online course non-completion. The study provides practical guidance for educators and emphasises the importance of emotional responsiveness in online learning environments. Effective online teaching should go beyond content delivery to encompass deliberate cultivation of supportive relationships that recognise and respond to students' emotional needs within their complex life situations.

References

- Anderson, T., Rourke, L., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in a computer conferencing context. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5(2), 1-17.
<https://auspace.athabascau.ca/bitstream/handle/2149/725/assess?sequence=1>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners.
- Bañeres, D., Rodríguez-González, M. E., Guerrero-Roldán, A. E., & Cortadas, P. (2023). An early warning system to identify and intervene online dropout learners. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 20(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-022-00371-5>
- Caskurlu, S., Maeda, Y., Richardson, J. C., & Lv, J. (2020). A meta-analysis addressing the relationship between teaching presence and students' satisfaction and learning. *Computers & Education*, 157, 103966. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.103966>
- Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage publications.
- Cutri, R. M., Mena, J., & Whiting, E. F. (2020). Faculty readiness for online crisis teaching: Transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 523-541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1815702>
- Darby, F., & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small teaching online: Applying learning science in online classes*. John Wiley & Sons.

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

- Dulfer, N., Gowing, A., & Mitchell, J. (2025). Building belonging in online classrooms: relationships at the core. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 30(4), 1024-1040. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2024.2349993>
- Fanshawe, M., Burke, K., Tualaulelei, E., & Cameron, C. (2020). Creating emotional engagement in online learning. *EDUCAUSE Review*. <https://er.educause.edu/blogs/2020/8/creating-emotional-engagement-in-online-learning>
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6)
- Greenland, S. J., & Moore, C. (2022). Large qualitative sample and thematic analysis to redefine student dropout and retention strategy in open online education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 53(3), 647-667. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13173>
- Guo, W., Wang, J., Li, N. *et al.* (2025) The impact of teacher emotional support on learning engagement among college students mediated by academic self-efficacy and academic resilience. *Sci Rep* 15, 3670. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-88187-x>
- Immordino-Yang, M. H., & Damasio, A. (2007). We feel, therefore we learn: The relevance of affective and social neuroscience to education. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 1(1), 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-228X.2007.00004.x>
- Kong, X., Liang, H., Wu, C., Li, Z., & Xie, Y. (2025). The association between perceived teacher emotional support and online learning engagement in high school students: The chain mediating effect of social presence and online learning self-efficacy. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 40(1), Article 33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-024-00932-4>
- Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning*, 22(1), 205-222. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1092>
- Martin, F., Wang, C., & Sadaf, A. (2018). Student perception of helpfulness of facilitation strategies that enhance instructor presence, connectedness, engagement and learning in online courses. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 37, 52-65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2018.01.003>
- McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2011). *All you need to know about action research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Miao, J., & Ma, L. (2022). Students' online interaction, self-regulation, and learning engagement in higher education: The importance of social presence to online learning. *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 815220. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.815220>
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (updated). Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles: University of California Press (Original work published 1984).
- Ong, Sharmaine Gek Teng, and Gwendoline Choon Lang Quek. "Enhancing teacher–student interactions and student online engagement in an online learning environment." *Learning environments research* 26.3 (2023): 681-707. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-022-09447-5>
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. Sage Publications.
- Pekrun, R., Lichtenfeld, S., Marsh, H. W., Murayama, K., & Goetz, T. (2017). Achievement emotions and academic performance: Longitudinal models of reciprocal effects. *Child Development*, 88(5), 1653-1670. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12704>
- Rahmani, A. M., Groot, W., & Rahmani, H. (2024). Dropout in online higher education: a systematic literature review. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 21(1), 19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-024-00450-9>
- Redmond, P., Heffernan, A., Abawi, L., Brown, A., & Henderson, R. (2018). An online engagement framework for higher education. *Online Learning*, 22(1), 183-204. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1175>
- Richardson, J. C., Maeda, Y., Lv, J., & Caskurlu, S. (2017). Social presence in relation to students' satisfaction and learning in the online environment: A meta-analysis. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 71, 402-417. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.02.001>
- Rowe, A. D., & Fitness, J. (2018). Understanding the Role of Negative Emotions in Adult Learning and Achievement: A Social Functional Perspective. *Behavioral Sciences*, 8(2), 27. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs8020027>
- Stone, C. (2017). Opportunity through online learning. *National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education 2016 Equity Fellowship Final Report*.

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

- Tackie, H. N. (2022). (Dis) Connected: Establishing social presence and intimacy in teacher–student relationships during emergency remote learning. *AERA Open*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858421106952>
- Thompson, C. S. (2018). The construct of ‘respect’ in teacher-student relationships: Exploring dimensions of ethics of care and sustainable development. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 17(3), 42-60. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V17/I3/R3>
- Tronto, J. C. (1998). An ethic of care. *Generations: Journal of the American society on Aging*, 22(3), 15-20. <https://www.istor.org/stable/44875693>
- Tyng, C. M., Amin, H. U., Saad, M. N., & Malik, A. S. (2017). The influences of emotion on learning and memory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1454. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01454>
- Velasquez, A., West, R., Graham, C., & Osguthorpe, R. (2013). Developing caring relationships in schools: A review of the research on caring and nurturing pedagogies. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(4), 529-568. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3014>
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(2), 64-70. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4102_2

Lake, P. Hattam, S. & Carter, A. (2025). Building adaptable learners beyond content delivery: Using care ethics to foster emotional engagement and course completion in online learning. In S. Barker, S. Kelly, R. McInnes & S. Dinmore (Eds.), *Future Focussed. Educating in an era of continuous change*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2025. Adelaide (pp. 43-54) <https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2025.2625>

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.

The author(s) assign a Creative Commons by attribution license enabling others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon their work, even commercially, as long as credit is given to the author(s) for the original creation.

© Lake, P., Hattam, S. & Carter, A. 2025