Weaving Threads of Care

A Transdisciplinary Self-Study of Online Teaching Practices

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A collaborative inquiry group at a rural midwestern university sought to support and challenge those teaching or preparing to teach online courses through self-study of teaching practices. The group's purpose was to create a community of scholar-practitioners who systematically study their online teaching in a supportive community while sharing ideas, developing professionally, and producing scholarship of teaching that could be shared with university stakeholders during a time of institutional change. In this paper, the self-study research group reflects on three academic years of collaborative inquiry in response to the question, "How has identifying care as a transdisciplinary value impacted our communication with one another as researchers and communication in our teaching practices?" Drawing from examples in each of our disciplines, we describe how care became a common thread woven through the group's interaction and collaboration.

Context

The goal of self-study of teaching practices is for faculty to be active agents in reframing their practices and beliefs at both the personal and professional level and for improvement-aimed purposes beyond themselves (Loughran & Northfield, 1998; Samaras, 2014). Self-study researchers inquire into their own practice, question it, seek to see it from multiple perspectives in order to see and re-see what they do, why they do it, and how else it might be done. Self-study researchers seek to learn from their own and others' instructional experiences.

The online self-study group brought together five faculty from the disciplines of literacy education, educational leadership, special education, nursing, and psychology. This group included faculty with varying levels of experience as online educators and self-study researchers. The three researchers from education had previously conducted self-study research, while the researchers from psychology and nursing were new to self-study methodology.

Institutional Context

In 2016, the Higher Learning Commission charged our university with establishing distance learning criteria and expectations for teaching, including evaluation of online courses, ensuring consistency of online course rigor, and maintaining consistency between online and on-campus sections of the same course. Recognizing the need to support

effective online instruction, the university's Global Campus created a new faculty scholar position to help plan and coordinate online teaching institutional initiatives. Relevant to this study, the scholar (Christi) invited faculty to participate in an online self-study inquiry group (Loughran & Northfield,1998; Freidas et al., 2005). The five faculty researchers responded to the call and thus began a systematic study of their online teaching practices for three academic years. During this time, the researchers often returned to questions of perceptions and demonstrations of care in their own courses.

Theoretical Framework

Building from our (Bethney, Christi, and Abby) prior self-study research, we situated our study in transactional epistemological reading and learning theory (e.g., Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) complemented by feminist communication theory (e.g., Belenky et al., 1986; Belenky et al., 1997; Colflesh, 1996) and adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2005). Epistemologically, transactional and feminist communication theories recognize dynamic relationships between knowers and their environments, both in what they know and how they communicate knowledge. This dynamic framework supported faculty researchers being active meaning-makers in a community that improved teaching practices, student learning, and contributed to the larger academic landscape, specifically, the university's shifting culture and expectations for online teaching.

Methodology

Self-study of teaching practices was selected to foster faculty agency in reframing practices and beliefs at both personal and professional levels and for improvement-aimed purposes beyond ourselves (Loughran & Northfield, 1998; Samaras, 2014). We chose to critically examine our teaching in order to develop more consciously driven modes of pedagogic/andragogic activity as opposed to relying on habit, tradition, or impulse (Samaras, 2002; Samaras, 2014). Collaborative self-study methodology has resulted in changing pedagogy (Samaras, 2014), faculty development (Kitchen et al., 2008), supporting the scholarship of teaching (Smith & Bradbury, 2019), identifying challenges to online teaching (Anderson et al., 2011; Parsons & Hjalmarson, 2017), creating a shared culture (Edge et al., 2020), co-facilitating transdisciplinary learning communities (Samaras et al., 2016), transformative experiences (Freidas et al., 2005), and taking action beyond self to support social action and community development (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2008). As a group, we engaged in collaborative discussions with supportive, critical friends (Schuck & Russell, 2005; Smith & Bradbury, 2019) who provided alternative (cross-disciplinary) perspectives; examined problems in practice; shared case studies to make tacit understandings more explicit; and articulated beliefs about instructional practices for others to see, examine, question, utilize, and reflect on practice (Freidus, et al., 2005).

Over three academic years, our cross-disciplinary research group met biweekly or weekly. Individual and group-generated data and data generated collectively during research meetings. Individually-generated data included: reflective journals; documented decisions made by the researcher during her online teaching sessions; communication with students via the learning management system and email; teaching artifacts such as instructive letters, videos, and other forms of instructor communication; and individually-composed "take away" reflections that were shared with others in a shared Google drive. Group-generated data included audio recordings of meetings and collective meeting notes.

Data Analysis

Using a modified collaborative conference protocol (Bergh et al., 2018; Cameron-Standerford, et al., 2013) to structure our interactions, we sought to intentionally construct a generative, collaborative public homeplace (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). Our initial goals were to examine and create an understanding of disciplinary values without assumption and to re-frame our online teaching in light of those values. Our early notes indicate that we expected or

hoped to replicate the cross-disciplinary meaning-making we (Bethney, Christi, and Abby) had experienced as a result of our diverse sub-disciplines within the field of education through the use of a collaborative conference protocol.

Collaborative Conference Protocol

The process of using a collaborative conference protocol (CCP) included: (1) Textualizing and sharing examples of communication, teaching artifacts, and personal reflections. Through sharing artifacts, we sought to generate new understandings of the role of care in our online courses. (2) We listened to each individual's initial sharing of their artifact in light of our own disciplinary values and in the broader context of online teaching. (3) In response to the sharing, we took turns saying what we heard or noticed while the individual who had shared quietly took notes. (4) We then invited the individual back into the conversation to respond to comments or questions offered by the group or to offer additional details or insights sparked by listening to the group. Through the process of (5) re-reading the texts of our online teaching practices, we cultivated a (6) connection between each other's experiences, our diverse individual professional knowledge, and the collective understanding from which we built new knowledge.

Outcomes

In year one, our initial data analysis resulted in identifying individual disciplinary values. At the beginning and end of our second semester of inquiry, data was further analyzed which led to identifying transdisciplinary themes related to online teaching practices. These themes included: communication in the online setting, demonstrating care in the online setting, and reframing crisis events into opportunities for demonstrating care across personal, professional, and structural events. We saw that care had become a central theme connecting or threading together our broader themes; as a result, we decided to take another look at our individual teaching practices in light of our collaborations and discussions surrounding the relationship between care and rigor in teaching. At the beginning of year three, each person wrote a reflective summary in response to the question: How has identifying care as a transdisciplinary value impacted (a) communication with one another as researchers and (b) communication with our students in the context of our teaching practices? In these reflections, we noticed care had become a common thread woven into our interactions as S-STEP researchers as well as in our diverse disciplinary teaching practices.

Care through Communication in Christi's Teaching Practices in Literacy Education

As a literacy education teacher educator, I understand the importance of explicit teaching and modeling, of naming thinking moves and pedagogical strategies for purposes of my students' learning. As a result of our self-study group identifying care as a transdisciplinary value, I now see how care can be a frame for "reading" and interpreting classroom events. Care can be a stance I choose to frame my attention, choices, and actions in both online and face-to-face teaching. I am also beginning to understand that care in teaching is something I can model and also name.

One early example happened the second week of class, when my undergraduate students and I discovered class members had purchased and read two different books. Apparently, there was a mix-up at the bookstore, however, it wasn't until mid-discussion, when we discovered what happened. I wrote about the event in my journal and later shared it with the self-study research group.

> Today, I told my students, "The research group I'm in has come to reframe chaos as opportunities for care." (Laura's example and phrasing really stuck with me and helped me here). We are experiencing a moment of chaos, so let's make this a moment through which we can care about one another. We each have something to contribute, even if we didn't read the same chapters. I can also care [a verb] by helping us to be okay with the messiness of this moment. I can consider what is most important and what isn't-- the act of doing an assignment or even the content of the textbook isn't what's most important-- your learning, our learning is. I can envision beyond this moment to consider the purposes of the course, listen to where we are in our thinking and the direction we next could be going as a whole class. I can listen and

help us all to hear big ideas and details that will fuel our intended learning as well as embrace the unexpected but meaningful turns our learning takes.

Later, one of my students, Dana, commented to me privately about this moment of chaos-turned-opportunity to care. She identified my pausing to acknowledge the situation, my tone of voice, my references to the research group, and the "spirit of care" I demonstrated. "I can tell you really do care," she concluded. (Notebook entry, January, 2018)

Interactions in the cross-disciplinary research group have impacted what and how I know. I now realize I entered into our larger S-STEP group with an unarticulated value and expectation for care. Without consciously realizing it, my previous interactions with cross-disciplinary critical friends inside my department had guided me to weave understandings of research with care through collaborative self-study. Experiencing S-STEP with critical friends beyond the school of education extended the concept of a "public homeplace" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 13) from the established safety of our existing group of teacher educators to include critical friends from nursing, and psychology. This fabric of this collaborative space positioned me to experience the safe vulnerability needed to challenge my teaching practices and to embrace moments of wobble, that is, an "authored sense of uncertainty that lies between and among figured worlds" a sense of "vertigo [that] creates opportunities for examining practice in ways that might not otherwise occur (Fecho, et al., 2005, p. 175). New knowledge can be woven in the space between present knowing and potential knowings made more visible when illuminated by the care of critical friends. Specifically, care shifted from my tacit assumption to a more conscious way of being and becoming. I can empower myself and create an environment where students and I push back the unexpected and unwelcome chaos enough to create some space to think and to act rather than react. I can choose to care. I can create care. I can choose to position myself to reframe moments of chaos as opportunities to care, to act and to communicate in ways that both care for my students and also help me to consciously attend to this act.

As a literacy educator, I understand before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading strategies can purposefully and intentionally guide meaning-making for individuals and for groups of learners as they read. Through our cross-disciplinary S-STEP group, I have been able to textualize, (Edge, 2011; Cameron-Standerford, et al., 2013; Bergh et al., 2018) read, and interpret my teaching practices through the frame of care before, during, and after teaching events. I see how threading cognitive, social, and emotional learning framed by the loom of care can be strategic, purposeful, meaningful, and generative, if not transformational. As teacher educators, our students read us—as living texts of what it means to be a teacher. They also experience learning through the events we weave, as inter-active, trans-action, eco-logical teaching and learning. The cognitive, social, kinesthetic, and emotional loom of care can be a space upon which we wobble our way to transforming what, how, and why we know together.

Care through Communication in Abby's Teaching Practices in Learning Disabilities Education

As the director of the graduate learning disabilities program, I have the privilege of designing and teaching the majority of the courses in the program. This affords me the opportunity to learn with my students across multiple semesters. When I first began teaching in the online setting, I was surprised at how well I was able to know my students through only their written work. Discussion forums, case studies, reflections, and projects became tapestries from which my students' professional voices were shared. I also learned about their personal challenges. Through email or personal messages in the moodle platform, students shared their life experiences…. births, deaths, marriages, divorces, seriously ill children, catastrophic diagnosis of self and family and also shared professional experiences that caused "wobble" (Fecho, 2011, p. 53) … hired under an emergency permit to teach the most challenging of students, negotiating differing perspectives from administration, the tiring reality of always needing to advocate for their students.

From the onset of my online teaching experiences, I consciously worked to model pedagogy for my graduate students. I knew that my students had to experience learning for themselves before they would be able to provide similar experiences to their K12 students (Bergh et al., 2014). Initially, my focus was on communicating the *what* -- the content, the rigor -- of the courses. What I realized through my research within this self-study group was the importance of also

demonstrating *how* I care for and value my students and their personal and professional life experiences. Being responsive to my students' academic and social-emotional needs through open and caring dialogue created an online environment in which I soon noticed my students communicating with one another in a similar way as I had communicated with them.

Exploring the role of care in the online setting through the lens of self-study methodology identified the importance of how communication patterns cultivate an individualized and responsive online learning environment for my graduate students. Our self-study group helped me to explore the ways in which I communicated care through my responses to my students' academic, personal, and professional needs. This focus resulted in more purposeful and explicit responses of care to both individual and course level concerns, needs, and communication.

Care through Communication in Bethney's Educational Leadership

Participating in this cross-disciplinary self-study research group prompted me to purposefully read the texts of communication generated with my students over the past several years. Of particular interest were the trails of emails in which students reached out to share a moment of unexpected chaos occurring in their lives. As they shared the events in writing, it became evident that these moments of chaos were often upending their personal lives (and sometimes professional) and were impacting their ability to engage in their courses through online discussions or to complete readings, assignments, or projects in accordance with the course schedule. As I read through the transactions I recognized that my responses most often provided the needed space for the student to work through the chaos and to return to their course work when they were ready. For example, when a student shared that her husband was recently diagnosed with a brain tumor, my response was, *I am so sorry to hear this news. I will keep you and your husband in my thoughts and hope for the best. I understand if there may be times when you need extensions, etc - just keep me in the loop. If you think you may be late or need extra time with any group work, post a message to your group so they are aware that you may be late.* And when another student was in a car accident and suffered a brain injury but was going to continue with their work, I responded, *I am so sorry to hear of your accident. I am glad to read that you will be completing your course work. I will check at the end of the week for your work. Please let me know if you need anything from my end.* After teaching online for nine years, I realized I had countless examples of when students reached out to share a moment of chaos and I responded to each in a similar manner. What wasn't expressed in my written responses, but I was well aware of was my inner monologue in which I grappled with my responsibility to prepare each graduate student to be a school leader who could persevere through difficulties and come out the otherside better than when the chaos originally landed in their lives. From my personal experience as a school leader, I knew that chaos often erupted in the day-to-day work of a principal or superintendent - and to get through it, somehow, you needed to continue to lead. On many levels, I knew this was out of my control, but I knew that by maintaining a level of "rigor" while expressing care, I could help my student return to a level of equilibrium that was so unexpectedly disrupted.

Specifically, through the practice of reading the texts, I have come to better understand how the intentional practice of implementing elements of care and rigor impact one's experience in the online classroom. The intentionality behind the presence of care and rigor becomes foundational to the classroom culture and serves as a guide for both students and instructors in decision making. This decision making ultimately leads to a cycle of experiences that potentially influence the practices teachers and leaders present within their own k-12 classroom and school settings.

Care through Communication in Katie's Teaching Practices in Nursing

Care is a core value within the nursing discipline, however, care is not always seen as the primary role of the nursing educator. In nursing education, we are expected to create rigor in an effort to ensure that students who progress through our programs will grow into competent practitioners. This self-study group helped me to re-establish confidence in allowing care to be of primary importance in my interactions with students and colleagues. Our work has helped me to understand that care and rigor can exist simultaneously and that caring for our students can positively impact rigor.

Working with this group of educators and collaborating through research has resulted in the development of a more secure identity for me as a nursing educator. I teach in and coordinate an online program for primarily non-traditional students who are returning to school after many years in the workforce. Balancing care and rigor among this group has been difficult at times as I strive to ensure they feel supported in the university setting, yet are challenged through their coursework. Working in this collaborative group has solidified and in some ways changed how I demonstrate care through my communications.

I work to demonstrate care by making sure students know I am available and taking the time to listen to their needs. When responding to their questions or even their complaints, I take the time to frame my words in such a way that I will come across as being supportive rather than critical. I attempt to respond quickly to emails and phone calls. These students have a variety of work schedules and are not always available during normal working hours, because of this, I often make myself available to them on evenings and weekends to be sure they feel supported and can have real-time interaction with their instructor/advisor. When providing feedback on student work, I make sure to not only correct mistakes but to also help them to understand what resources are available to them to ensure their work is improved in the future. Although our group focuses on the interactions we have with our online students, the growth I have experienced in this group has also impacted my teaching and encounters with face-to-face students.

We have also gained insight into how to demonstrate care to our colleagues. For me personally, the use of the collaborative conference protocol (Bergh et al., 2018; Cameron-Standerford, et al., 2013) has been a welcome part of this learning experience. When working in groups, I tend to jump in and take the lead, fill most moments with conversation, and encourage groups to move through work very quickly. In learning how to put this protocol into practice, I believe I have become more comfortable with making time for silence and reflection and in turn, I have grown to become a better listener when it comes to my interactions with my colleagues.

Significance

Reflecting on our self-study journey (Loughran, 2018), we began to realize our focus on the tension between care and rigor stemmed from our identified transdisciplinary values and collaborative experiences over time. Through the use of a cross-disciplinary public homeplace and the use of a collaborative conference protocol, we developed a more conscious awareness of care in our communication with one another and in our teaching practices. *Care*, we realized, was more than a topic, a value, an ethic, or even a philosophy; care is a thread through which we collaborated, a textile for studying instructor-learner interaction in our teaching practices, a tapestry of transformation, and an active practice through which we have generated new knowledge through transdisciplinary self-study of our online teaching practices. In the context of nursing, the care dialogue approach requires that ethical issues be handled as a complex, inductive, and social process (Schuchter & Heller, 2018). Specific to the education setting, Deacon (2012) argued that "creating a context of care in a classroom creates a robust environment for student learning; it facilitates better dialogue between students and teachers and allows teachers to draw out individual students and help them achieve their potential" (p. 6).

These cross-disciplinary perspectives also created a space for us to step back from the immediacy of our own experiences, distancing ourselves enough to consider the relationship between events, patterns, and themes both in relation to and juxtaposed to others' past experiences and in light of our present, collective, growing understanding of care and rigor in online teaching. After our meetings, we "stepped back into" the flow of our teaching experiences, bringing with us care as a frame of reference, a lens through which to not only interpret events but also to make new opportunities. Ultimately, the collaborative conference protocol guided us to see and re-see our communication patterns and pedagogical decisions from diverse perspectives and to form new understandings of our teaching practices (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). In light of an inquiry-based frame, our meaning making resulted in a collective ability to explicitly and purposefully center care in our interactions with our students in online settings.

Reflecting on the three-year process of collaborative self-study, we have transformed our understanding of care from that of an object--a value to identify in our data--to seeing care as a medium, as an active personal and professional event through which we constructed a collaborative inquiry group. Care also became a common thread in our

conversations, and then became a textile for examining teaching and learning events. We began to change our practices in light of our ongoing focus on care in the online teaching environment. For instance, we restitched our perception of chaos (events such as the bookstore ordering the wrong books, or upsetting student remarks) to be opportunities to demonstrate care; frantic student emails became an opportunity to choose our words, tone, and message to reflect care. Finally, we now are envisioning care as a new "pattern" for (re)examining the larger institutional phenomenon of rigorous online teaching and learning for purposes of understanding and for transformation.

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