Student and Instructor Perceptions of Care in Online Graduate Education

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Abstract. Nodding's (1984) theory of care evolved before online education became main stream. Therefore, this study was conducted to learn how students and instructors described care and what language or strategies they perceived as conveying care in online education. Online instructor interviews, online student survey, and course shell review were conducted. The findings of this study were viewed through Noddings' three constructs of care. Findings showed that among Nodding's three major constructs, Engrossment and Affective Engagement were found to be aligned in this virtual caring environment; however, Reciprocity was not.

Introduction

The growth of online course enrollment has exceeded the growth of face-to-face courses with more than one in four college students taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). However, little is known about what types of relationships are developed in these virtual environments between the instructors and the students. Noddings (1984, 1988) indicates that caring is a key component of the instructor-student relationship, but little is also known about how her care theory is translated into the virtual setting. The purpose of this study was to determine how graduate students and instructors describe care in online courses, and what language and strategies they perceive as conveying care in online education.

Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Using Nodding's (1984, 1988, 1995, 2001, 2002) care theory, questions were crafted for structured interviews and surveys. The study was conducted at a Midwestern, midsized university. Structured online interviews were conducted with the instructors, and an online survey was offered to students in the eight participating graduate instructors' courses with 46/222 students responding.

The researcher conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of all data, including a document review of the instructors' course delivery shells, investigating language usage in Announcements, Discussion Boards, and Assignment Feedback in the Gradebook for triangulation of the data.
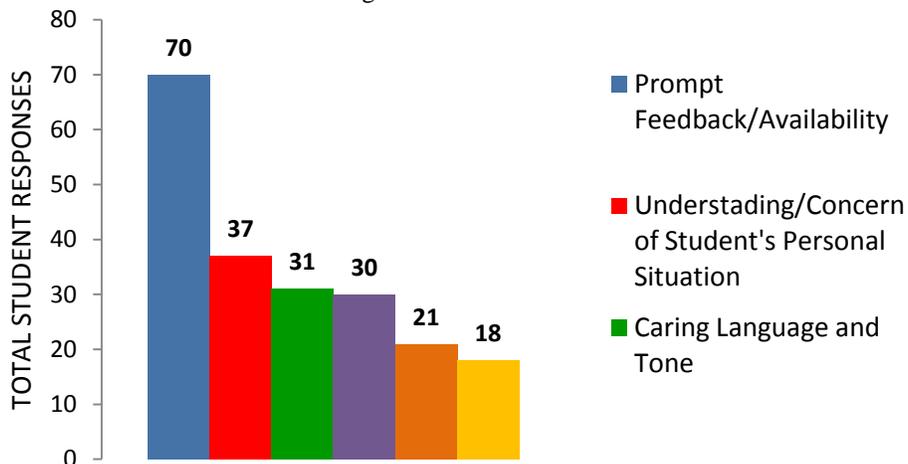

Fig. 1. Top Themes for Graduate Students' Description of Care in Online Graduate Education.

Six themes surfaced when students described instructor caring in a virtual world as shown above in Figure 1. These themes, in order of priority with the first being most cited, were: (a) prompt feedback in responding/being available, (b) instructor concern/flexibility for students' personal situations, (c) instructor use of caring language and tone, (d) specific and constructive instructor feedback, (e) participation of the instructor in the Discussion Board, and (f) instructor use of video conferencing.

When collapsing all qualitative question responses as shown in Figure 2 below, three themes emerged that were most noted by all eight instructor interview respondents. The research showed instructors believed the top caring themes were (a) understanding and concern for graduate students' personal situations as non-traditional students with busy lives, (b) prompt feedback and availability for students, and (c) use of caring language and tone in all communication media.
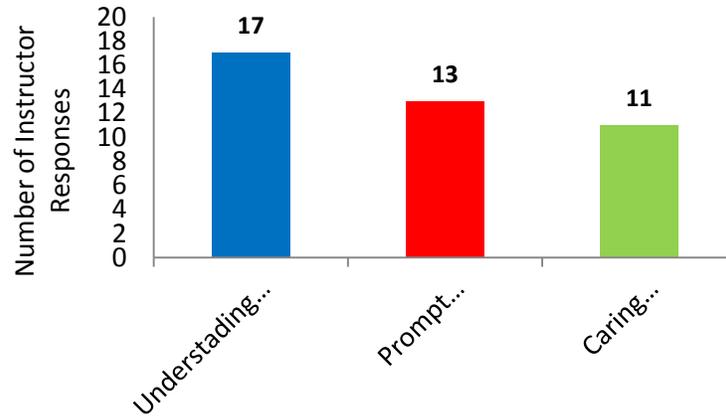

Fig. 1 Top Themes for Graduate Instructors' Description of Care in Online Instruction

The findings of the study supported the three major constructs of Noddings' care theory. The first construct was mental attentiveness in which students indicated the importance of the immediacy of feedback. The second construct was affective engagement, in which students expressed that feedback include specific comments and praise with caring language and concern for the students' personal situations. The third construct was reciprocity, which students conveyed the importance of student-instructor interaction in the discussion board and also of video conferencing in order to promote reciprocal interaction. However, the quantitative and qualitative data found that this third element of Nodding's theory (1984), reciprocity, was rated by the student in the top six caring strategies for online instructors, but was not being addressed by the online instructors at the level of the students' desires or expectations.

Conclusions
The findings of this study may lead to actions by instructors that could convey more caring and increase student engagement, satisfaction, and achievement, thereby increasing universities' recruitment and retention efforts. Most importantly, the findings may add to the existing literature of what a caring graduate instructor-student relationship encompasses in online education.

Acknowledgements

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