

# **An Exploratory Study of University Teachers' Conceptions and Articulation of Care amidst Online Teaching**

Anne L. L. Tang<sup>a\*1</sup>, Caroline Walker-Gleaves<sup>b</sup>, and, Julie Rattray<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Anne L. L. Tang

School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

E-mail Address: [annetang625@gmail.com](mailto:annetang625@gmail.com)

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8409-9508

*\*Corresponding Author*

Anne Tang's research interests include teacher care, Vygotsky's social constructivism, and Confucian heritage culture (CHC).

<sup>b</sup> Caroline Walker-Gleaves

School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University,  
King George VI Building, Queen Victoria Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, United Kingdom

Email: [caroline.walker-gleaves@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:caroline.walker-gleaves@newcastle.ac.uk)

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-7236-2316

Caroline Walker-Gleaves is a Professor of Education within the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University. Her research interests include teachers' beliefs and behaviours, higher education pedagogy and inclusive education

<sup>c</sup> Julie Rattray

School of Education, Durham University

Leazes Road, Durham, DH1 1TA, United Kingdom

Email: [julie.rattray@durham.ac.uk](mailto:julie.rattray@durham.ac.uk)

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-7261-7830

Julie Rattray is Professor in Higher Education at Durham University. Her research interests include the threshold concept framework, liminality, affective dimensions of learning as well as other aspects of policy and pedagogy in Higher Education. In particular she is interested in the ways that learners deal with troublesome knowledge and the extent to which affective characteristics and attributes might influence this

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne Tang is currently a Research Assistant at Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change, The Education University of Hong Kong

# **An Exploratory Study of University Teachers' Conceptions and Articulation of Care amidst Online Teaching**

## **Abstract**

This exploratory study aimed to examine university teachers' conceptions and articulation of care amidst online teaching. The pandemic-initiated sudden changes to online platform-based teaching and consequently caused many teachers to critically reflect on those affective and relational behaviors and interactions that are possible during physically-embodied pedagogy, but that are either no longer possible or even undesirable online. This has resulted in a research gap that we feel this study addresses, by drawing on the reflections and experiences of nine caring academic and teaching staff in a Hong Kong public university. Thematic analysis of these reflections relating to the practice of, and barriers to, care emphasised the overarching theme of the centrality of presence about, and for, students. This overarching theme was complemented by two sub-themes relating to 'lacking physical presence as a barrier to care' and 'building an online presence for articulation of care'. On the basis of these exploratory findings, we offer preliminary arguments relating to a caring pedagogical approach underpinned by a deepening of presence and learning collaboration. This paper, we argue, adds to the body of knowledge in the under-researched area of teacher care amidst online teaching, and suggests a future theorisation of online care within higher education pedagogy.

## **Keywords**

Teacher Care, Ethics of Care, Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, Online Teaching, Technological Affordances

# **An Exploratory Study of University Teachers' Conceptions and Articulation of Care amidst Online Teaching**

## **Introduction**

As a consequence of the unforeseen and unplanned changes to online platform-based teaching during the global pandemic, a lack of face-to-face interactions **has** led to a critical reflection on those affective and relational pedagogical behaviors that are possible during physically-embodied pedagogy, yet are either no longer possible or perhaps undesirable online (Christopher et al., 2020; Green et al., 2020). Whilst exploring and utilising innovative technological resources in online teaching, literature has shown that human presence and care continue to play a role in promoting the relational dialectic between students and teachers and the resulting interplay of affect and cognition for knowledge co-construction (Goldstein, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Excellent university teachers use an array of behaviors to create effective learning experiences underpinned by high-quality student-teacher **relationships**. A **core** construct of these relational approaches is care (Tett et al., 2017; Walker & Gleaves, 2016; Walker-Gleaves, 2009). Although care is not the panacea for solving all educational problems, research within the post-secondary school context has demonstrated that teacher care has both transformative and positive impacts upon students' academic behavior, motivation, and outcomes (Tett et al., 2017; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). The global pandemic moreover has prompted more university teachers to consider the importance of care in providing students with learning, emotional and holistic support (Christopher et al., 2020; Corbera et al., 2020). However, this move to online pedagogic practices has made many academics reflect on and question two aspects of their practice: firstly, what is a unique affordance of face-to-face teaching that continues to make it the dominant means of education practice in higher education throughout the world, particularly in relation to care and caring teaching? Secondly, has the move to online teaching made visible actual impediments to caring that are only possible in person, or has it exposed the possibility of a new caring paradigm entirely? These issues are central to the research presented in this paper.

Literature has shown that the positive cognitive, social, and emotional benefits that online asynchronous communication could afford might not exceed those of face-to-face synchronous interactions (Yin & Shi, 2021). The existing empirical studies of the specific effects of the pedagogical uses of synchronous and asynchronous online communication on students' academic behaviors and performances still reveal ambiguous results (Francescucci & Rohani,

2019; Lin & Gao, 2020; Yin & Shi, 2021). Furthermore, students' experiences of using digital devices for recreation or informal learning might influence their views about using these technologies in formal learning contexts (Guzman-Simon et al., 2017; Mao, 2014). Recent technological advancement has revealed new possibilities for university teachers to explore technology for educational purposes. However, the use of online teaching platforms might still challenge conventional ways of how university teachers integrate teacher care into their pedagogical practices during online teaching, which would be potentially different from that of face-to-face classroom mode. Given the expected increase in using online platforms or hybrid modes of teaching in the post-pandemic context (Christopher et al., 2020; Green et al., 2020), we argue that conducting research into university teachers' articulation of pedagogical caring amidst online teaching is timely.

Underpinned by an ethics of care framed within Vygotskian social constructivism, this exploratory study aimed to explore university teachers' conceptions and articulation of teacher care as informed by their online teaching experiences. The concept of ethical care is aligned with a constructivist **position and** premised on the moral obligation to care, has been applied to examinations of the dynamic interactions and responsibilities entailed in an online community (O'Reilly et al., 2021), a Vygotskian constructivist frame has been adopted to investigate knowledge building via online platforms (Churcher et al., 2014). Thus, the integration of these two conceptual frameworks in this exploratory study will contribute to enriching the body of knowledge in the under-researched area of teacher care and its complexity of embodiment and articulation amidst online teaching within the higher education context. Practically, in this article, we suggest implications for integrating care into higher education pedagogy for coping with the increasing use of online platforms and hybrid modes of teaching in the post-pandemic period.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Ethics of Care***

Ethics of care with its moral underpinnings is fundamentally a relational construct implying a dialectic of social relations and a mutuality of reciprocity with the moral obligations ensued (Noddings, 1984; O'Reilly et al., 2021). It entails a caring disposition, a long-term inclusive commitment, and **the** volition of acting compassionately and responsively for the cared-for's growth (Kim, 2007; Noddings, 1984; O'Reilly et al., 2021). It is motivated by the

pursuit of moral goodness, and a desire for relating to and receiving others in the caring relationships of receptivity, responsiveness through engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017; Kim, 2007; Noddings, 1984). Receptivity refers to the one-caring’s feeling for the cared-for and being open to the resulting pleasure or pain (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017; Kim, 2007). The one-caring accepts the other not as an object but as another themselves; and this generates strong responsibility for the cared-for (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017; Kim, 2007). Engrossment concerns the one-caring’s total attention and receptivity to the cared-for during the caring encounter (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017; Kim, 2007; Noddings, 1992). The one-caring is consumed with the needs of the cared-for, and such a total absorption facilitates motivational displacement (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017; Noddings, 1992). Motivational displacement refers to the one-caring’s willingness to give primacy to the cared-for’s needs and motivation to internalise the cared-for’s goals as one’s own realities; resulting in an action-oriented drive to act on behalf of the cared-for (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017; Kim, 2007; Noddings, 1992). Reciprocity reflects a mutuality of dialectical interactions between the one-caring and the cared-for (Noddings, 1984; O’Reilly et al., 2021). It is embodied in the cared-for’s acknowledgment of the one-caring’s care to complete a full caring cycle, sustaining the latter’s caring work (Kim, 2007; Noddings, 1984, 1992; O’Reilly et al., 2021)

Noddings’ (1984) discussion of caring behaviors is situated in a physical teaching environment, where teachers and students interact face-to-face. The lack of teachers’ physical presence amidst online teaching might suggest that the teacher-student dialectic is potentially different as compared to face-to-face teaching. The advancement of educational technologies has provided a range of resources for promoting dialogic discourses and collaboration with students to create an online presence for learning engagement and facilitation (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019; Ham & Davey, 2005). Teachers are presented with new opportunities and face new challenges to practise pedagogical caring to address students’ academic and non-academic needs amidst online teaching. This has unveiled research gaps that we would like to address.

### ***Ethical Care framed within Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism***

Predicated upon Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism, learning is an ongoing co-constructed process facilitated by the dialectic between learners and more capable others (namely, teachers) in a relational zone. The interplay of cognition and affect leads to knowledge co-construction, higher-order thinking, and independent problem-solving, hence closing the

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Goldstein, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). University teachers' caring work could better facilitate students' relational dynamics, and hence better stimulate the emotional-motivational drive to promote guided participation and scaffolding, and the resultant cognitive development (Garza & Van Overschelde, 2018; Goldstein, 1999). Literature on the interrelated processes of cognitive development and relational proximity also suggests **that** it is not the individuals themselves that induce increasingly critical thinking during the learning process, but how the subject knowledge is conveyed and opened up for scrutiny (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017; Goldstein, 1999; Noddings, 2003). This suggests that teacher care might be the means by which the cognitive and affective aspects of learning could be better interconnected for knowledge co-construction.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism was developed before the rapid advancement of educational technologies. The focus of the discussion was primarily on the manual tools used by teachers to engage students in the process of knowledge co-construction in the physically-embodied teaching context. Technological advances now offer teachers a new set of tools that can, potentially, be utilised to create an online presence (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Evans et al., 2020). This line of argument is predicated upon the **discussion** that teacher's creation of presence and their abilities to guide students' collaborative efforts and engage them in supportive and dialectical interactions are conducive to students' cognitive development (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). Exemplary teachers attend to students' needs, and well plan appropriate pedagogical strategies and select suitable technological resources for creating a feeling of online presence and a community of online learning for facilitating student's intellectual development (Guzman-Simon et al., 2017; Ham & Davey, 2005; Mao, 2014). For instance, asynchronous online communication might be used to promote learners' autonomy and self-directed learning (Lin & Gao, 2020; Watts, 2016). Learners however might not fully understand the course contents and might feel socially isolated and disconnected from the learning community (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019; Lin & Gao, 2020; Watts, 2016). On the other hand, synchronous online interactions might be used to promote students' learning engagement, facilitate dialogic discourses to develop cognitive skills, and create a feeling of connection to the learning community (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019; Lin & Gao, 2020; Watts, 2016). Nevertheless, learners might find it hard to understand some difficult concepts and might experience technological issues affecting their class participation (Lin & Gao, 2020). The effective applications of technologies, including synchronous and asynchronous online communication, to promote students' academic

engagement and outcomes might be further influenced by a number of personal and contextual factors, for example, learners' **characters**, abilities, and perceptions of technologies (Guzman-Simon et al., 2017; Watts, 2016; Yin & Shi, 2021). The existing varying empirical results about the pedagogical use of technologies still leave much room for further examination.

Technology however is only a tool, and its built-in benefits are subject to effective deployment by human teachers (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Ham & Davey, 2005; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). This implies that teachers have to review various technologies' suitability and affordances as an inherent part of the online teaching process, and the complex interactions with students situated within the particular online context to ensure that the chosen tools help them achieve the desired results (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). This calls for teachers' careful pedagogical considerations to use the most effective technologies for addressing students' learning needs (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Fu et al., 2013; Mao, 2014). The Vygotskian discussion thus might not fully account for the caring teaching work amidst an online environment. These have revealed research gaps that we would like to address, by bringing forward the discussions of technological affordances.

Technological affordances refer to those characteristics of technologies that enable or constrain learners' possible actions to accomplish learning tasks, given their needs, mental representation, knowledge, abilities, prior experiences, and tendencies (Antonenko et al., 2017; Carter et al., 1999; Mao, 2014; Wijekumar et al., 2006). Affordances are not only a property but also could be considered **an** agent-environment (i.e. human-computer) interaction (Antonenko et al., 2017; Wijekumar et al., 2006). Teachers' effective deployment of technological resources contributes to fostering a facilitative and supportive online learning environment congenial to students' learning engagement (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Ham & Davey, 2005; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006; Mao, 2014). University students however might have pre-conceptions and prior experiences of using certain technological devices confining their perspectives of those technologies and online platforms for pleasure or informal learning, instead of pedagogical use in a formal learning setting (Guzman-Simon et al., 2017; Mao, 2014). It is cautioned against making the assumption all students are proficient or even familiar with online learning platforms (Watts, 2016). Teachers thus assume an important role in understanding more about students' learning needs and readiness, and their attitudes and tendency to use particular technological tools (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Fu et al., 2013; Mao, 2014). They moreover undertake a significant role in examining the requirements of a specific

online environment and as such selecting the most appropriate technological aids for promoting students' academic study situated within that context (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Fu et al., 2013; Mao, 2014). For example, university instructors use virtual, interactive, real-time, instructor-led (VIRI) technology to involve students in synchronous interactions for developing a stronger feeling of connection and better engaging with course activities (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019). This might suggest that teachers who care about students and attend to their needs could better understand students' dispositions to use the particular educational technologies conducive to students' learning. Premised on the relational construct of technological affordances, this might imply that caring university teachers are likely in a better position to more flexibly and effectively deploy technological resources to address students' learning needs, and engage students in a dialectic of interactions for promoting their emotional-motivational drive, guided participation, scaffolding and higher-order thinking, and the resulting knowledge co-construction within the ZPD (Antonenko et al., 2017; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Carter et al., 1999).

Teacher care seems to be the means by which university teachers could better promote a dialectic of interactions with students amidst online teaching to co-mediate a relational zone conducive to students' learning empowerment and holistic development. More research is needed to gain deeper insights into the roles of teacher care in online teaching. Noddings' (1984) ethics of care recognises the importance of attentiveness, engrossment, responsiveness, responsibility, and reciprocity, underpinned by the core quality of trust, whilst Vygotskian social constructivism has acknowledged the significant interplay of affect and cognition in the process of knowledge co-construction. By positioning Noddings' ethical care within the Vygotskian framework, together with the discussions of technology affordances, this exploratory study aims to scrutinise university teachers' conceptions and articulation of care as informed by their online teaching practices in the face of the widening repertoire of educational technologies.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

This exploratory study adopted a reputational-case selection to identify the potential participants in a public university in Hong Kong (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The criteria for selecting the university were its representativeness of the higher education context. It has eight



faculties covering a broad spectrum of disciplines from science, engineering, social science, business to arts. It has more than 20,000 local and international students enrolled on programmes ranging from sub-degrees to research doctoral degrees and organises many extra-curricular programmes for students' holistic development. A learning management system and other educational technology support have been available to students and staff since the 1990s, and blended learning has been incorporated into the strategic [plan](#). Solicitation emails were sent to more than 1,200 academic and teaching staff employed in this university, to ask them to recommend a caring teacher in their faculties and state the reasons for their [nomination](#). We deliberately did not provide a specific definition of a caring teacher in the solicitation email, so as not to impose any preconceived assumptions about what 'a caring teacher should be' on the respondents, but leave more space for them to make the recommendation. In the end, fifteen caring teachers were recommended.

We assessed the written reasons for recommendation in accordance with the existing literature on teacher care and the pedagogical-behavioral caring exemplifiers (see below). These served as threshold criteria for scrutinising whether or not the stated reasons for recommending caring teachers met the conceptual premise of teachers' caring behaviors, to avoid any skewed recommendations due to unusual or discipline-specific interpretations of caring acts. These caring exemplifiers were used because they had been applied to vetting nominated cases of caring teachers in previous research to identify potential informants (Walker & Gleaves, 2016; Walker-Gleaves, 2009):

*Seven Pedagogical-behavioral Caring Exemplifiers*

- 1) Listen to students
- 2) Show empathy
- 3) Support student
- 4) Be active in the processes of learning in class
- 5) Give appropriate and encouraging feedback and praise
- 6) Have high expectations in standards of work and behavior
- 7) Show an active concern in students' personal lives

The first screening indicated that all 15 caring teachers met the criteria. The author sent a detailed invitation email with the research purposes to each of them to solicit their participation in this study. The email also asked them to fill in a 'Personal and Teaching Profile

Sheet' outlining their personal information and teaching profile and philosophy. This information served as another basis for appraising the extent to which they fulfilled the premise of a caring teacher. They moreover were asked if they taught at least one online course in the semester so that they could tell us about their most recent experiences of teaching online classes. Nine of the recommended caring teachers met the criteria and agreed to participate in the research. They varied in teaching experiences, disciplines, and positions (Table 1):

< Table 1 near here >

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection was a 2-stage process. Participants were requested to write a self-reflective piece about their teaching philosophy and caring practice amidst online teaching before attending an interview. These documents generated rich empirical accounts for probing their introspection of care in the subsequent interview and during data analysis. The conversational exchange provided a systematic structure that was thorough and allowed for questions eliciting introspection and conceptual thoughts to understand caring teachers' views and experiences (Seidman, 1998). In-depth interviews were scheduled after the completion of online teaching in the semester. This allowed participants to reflect on their caring practices during online teaching to obtain deeper insights into their articulation of care. They were also asked to share supporting materials if any (namely, students' written compliments emailed to teachers). An open-ended interview guide was developed:

#### *Examples of Interview Questions*

- 1) Think of an online class taught in the past semester, please describe your typical online teaching practices and behaviors.
- 2) Based on these teaching experiences, please summarise three essential acts to express your care to students during online teaching, explaining their purpose and motivation.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Microsoft Teams left to the discretion of participants. Each of the interviews lasted for 40 to 65 minutes and was recorded with permission. Verbatim transcription was used to maintain the integrity of participants' unmediated, self-disclosed accounts, and minimise any interpretation errors during data

analysis. Participants' narrations formed the main empirical data to inform the caring practices during online teaching, supplemented by researchers' detailed notes.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data-driven thematic analysis was adapted for analysing the empirical data. Data coding procedures were used to identify themes by scrutinising participants' interview transcripts, self-reflective pieces and supporting materials, and researchers' notes. Repeated and salient words, phrases, and sentences were coded by comparing and contrasting their meanings within participants' narrations centered on care. More than 250 open codes emerged after initial coding. By comparing and contrasting the manifested and hidden meanings and relationships among all the codes, lower-ordered themes were generated. The lower-ordered themes were further scrutinised to discern the underlying patterns and conceptual meanings for building up a hierarchy of overarching theme and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We strictly followed research ethics and maintained academic rigour during the whole research procedure. We used triangulation and iterative data analysis to ensure the neutrality of empirical findings. We continuously engaged in reflexivity and exchanged views on the whole coding and thematic analysis to critically assess and obtain deeper insights into participants' perspectives and meaning-making. These procedures resulted in the theoretical saturation of empirical results. These rigorous practices were to ensure that the findings and discussions are well-grounded on empirical analyses, and that reliability and credibility were established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Results**

Based on the thematic analysis of university teachers' narrations as informed by their online teaching experiences, an overarching theme 'centrality of presence in caring about and for students' learning and emotional needs' emerged and was predicated upon two sub-themes, 'lacking physical presence as a barrier to care' and 'building an online presence for articulation of care' (Figure 1). We will discuss the overarching theme first followed by a consideration of the two sub-themes.

< Figure 1 near here >

***Overarching Theme: Centrality of Presence in Caring about and for Students' Learning and Emotional Needs***

The 'centrality of presence in caring about and for students' learning and emotional needs' emerged as the overarching theme. Participants conceptualised the quintessence of teacher care amidst online teaching as a human presence in caring about and for students' learning and emotional needs. Teacher care was more than pedagogical care, but holistic care looking after students' academic study and emotional stress not be limited by the virtual class boundary. Creating and maintaining a sense of presence built on human touch and care was pivotal during online teaching. They assumed their professional responsibilities, and cared about and for students academically and holistically from the heart.

*Penny: 'Although online teaching is virtual, as a caring teacher, I still and always think human presence is very important.'*

*Peony: 'You need to do it from the heart. Even if we get through all the online platforms, even if sometimes sounds artificial or robotic, we still speak to a human, and we are still human, so you have to make sure that you care about all of the students' feelings, emotional, psychological and physical. Because we are not a robot, and we are not communicating with a robot. At the end of the receiver, it is still human, so we need a human touch to communicate with them to show them that we care.'*

Participants did not conceptualise teacher care as conflicting with their professionalism. As university teachers, they espoused their principles and values underpinned by professional roles and identities to care about and for students. They assumed their moral responsibilities for developing students academically and holistically. For example, they held high expectations and standards of students' performances and were strict about assignment quality and deadlines, rather than giving in to the students' unreasonable requests. They repudiated the notion that teaching was serving students like a customer.

*Kitty: 'Because my profession is a university teacher, I ought to care about students' emotions and well-being holistically, in addition to academic study.'*

*Dr D: 'I prefer using the word, "Facilitate", not the word "Satisfy". If it is within my capacity to facilitate students' learning, contributing to the core learning, and make students' learning experiences better, I will make my best efforts to do it. But it does not mean taking it for granted that students are customers and I must accommodate them, including some unreasonable demand.'*

Participants placed stress on empathising with students about their needs, difficulties, and stress. To them, empathy was not only the personal **quality** of being able to understand students' feelings, but also an approach to understanding and attending to students' learning and emotional needs, and their experiences, challenges, and distress encountered. For example, empathising allowed participants to better understand students' deep worries about under-performing and under-achieving as a consequence of the sudden changes to online teaching because of the social distancing measure. This has prompted participants to take extra time and additional **efforts** to reach out to students, individualise the academic and non-academic support, and walk them through the online study journey.

*Acid: 'Teachers needed to empathise with students and took one more step to think from their perspectives amidst online teaching. What kinds of difficulties did they encounter? I would find ways to help them.'*

Participants emphasised the importance of appreciating each student as a distinct individual genuinely from the heart, recognising their talents, and attending to their academic and non-academic needs. They maintained that teachers should not treat each student as though they were the same, or judge them by imposing the same standards. They should facilitate students to identify and develop their potential and strengths and help them cope with their weaknesses. They however admitted that they found it hard to identify with individual students and recognise their talents, potential, strengths, and weaknesses, because of lacking the opportunities to understand their students more through face-to-face interactions. These issues were exacerbated by the large class sizes and posed real obstacles to caring about and for their students amidst online teaching. Despite this, they indicated that although it might not be possible to be tailor-made because of the large class sizes, it would still be necessary to make adjustments to individualise as much as they could to accommodate students' needs, characters, and abilities for facilitating students' learning and achieving academic outcomes.

*Kitty: 'I'm here to teach them how to catch fish. It is impossible for me to teach them everything. It is necessary to facilitate them to learn how to acquire knowledge and skills, so they could keep learning in the future.'*

Participants' devotion to caring about and for students was reflected in their feelings of loss and frustration when failing to help students as much as they could because of barriers to care during online teaching.

### ***Sub-theme (1): Lacking Physical Presence as a Barrier to Care***

Participants considered the lack of physical presence as a major barrier to **caring** for students amidst online teaching. During face-to-face teaching, they could communicate and interact with students synchronously and in person. In contrast, they could not observe students' non-verbal behaviors as a prompt to gauge students' levels of understanding or attentiveness during an online class. Students could easily hide their identities or remain silent in an online class by hiding their faces or not responding. Some students seemed to participate in class, but appeared to be detached and withdrawn without genuine engagement, for example just typing out 'Yes/No' or an emoji when answering questions.

*Acid: 'Online mode has the disadvantage of creating real distantness with students, just looking at the webcam, lacking face-to-face expression. In a face-to-face class, you could observe whether students are perplexed. Body language is important. Online teaching is one-way, second-guessing whether students understand the knowledge.'*

Because knowing students deeply was central to care, the lack of face-to-face interactions during online teaching created a big barrier to individualising caring support and guidance for students. Participants lamented that they just knew students' signed-in names, but could not really know each student's characters, needs, and capabilities, because of the limited interactions online. Although participants did initiate casual conversations with students and invite them to share their views, the interactions were constrained by the online platform. The responses tended to be brief and curt, rather than promoting deep and continuous conversational exchanges. Even for those students who actively answered questions via 'Chat Box', they appeared to be a 'signed-in name' only. They found it difficult to identify with particular students and their level of participation due to lacking body language cues in an online class.

These issues with interactions were aggravated by the large class sizes, which posed real barriers to giving the care to attend to their students' needs during online teaching.

*Ida: 'I could only rely on the limited text information online to know the students superficially. In a face-to-face class, I could observe a student's appearance, response, and behaviours. This could help understand a student more and deeply.'*

Participants felt a sense of guilt when they failed to know students deeply, or offer timely caring support and helpful interventions as much as they could during an online class. They thus were devoted to building an online presence to overcome this barrier to care.

### ***Sub-theme (2): Building an Online Presence for Articulation of Care***

Participants articulated the main barrier to care by recourse to building an online presence. In general, they found it challenging to identify with specific students and their degree of engagement in an online class because there was a lack of body language cues. These issues with interactions were worsened by large class sizes, which posed real obstacles to providing care to attend to their students' needs in an online teaching environment. As such, they deepened their role as a collaborator for engaging students in learning collaboration and relationship building. They insisted on showing their faces during online classes, to convey a sense of presence, and the ease of being reached whenever students were in need. They spent extra time and additional efforts on creating a fun and engaging online environment conducive to students' knowledge acquisition and deep learning. For example, they utilised a wide repertoire of interesting and interactive teaching methods, like fun and games (namely, 'Kahoot!', third-party lucky draw software), to create a friendly, relaxing, and pleasurable online class atmosphere. They invited students to share their opinions and experiences to stimulate and engage the whole class in discussion. They aimed to create a sense of psychological security among students to bridge the perception of lacking human presence, whilst promoting their learning collaboration.

*Penny: 'Although I was not physically present in front of them if they could see my face, they knew that I was here, that was important.'*

*Kitty: 'I co-taught with another Professor. We developed a teaching plan. We explored many interactive class activities and the best ways to engage students.'*

*Because there were two of us, we made it like watching a TV programme, like we were having a chat about the lecture contents.'*

Learning collaboration amidst online teaching implied creating students' ownership of study and empowerment built on presence. Participants maintained open and two-way communication using different real-time communication methods (namely, 'Chat Box') and instant text messaging (like, 'WhatsApp') to facilitate almost immediate responses and interactions with students. They spent extra time and additional efforts on arranging one-to-one consultations and counselling to help students out academically and comfort them emotionally. They moreover admitted that they were not tech-savvy and emphasised that they were in the same boat with students learning how to use different online teaching platforms. They did not see themselves as superior to students, because of their hierarchical roles. They interacted with students on an egalitarian basis. They listened to students' opinions and suggestions, and engaged students in the decision-making process (namely, choosing the online learning platform).

*Kitty: 'Because I had an end-of-class survey for each class, "What are your learning experiences today?", "What are your difficulties encountered?", "How may I address your difficulties?", I would try my best to address their problems every time.'*

*Penny: 'I arranged a "TGIF consultation session" to allow students to enter the online session, and ask any questions about their assignments or lectures. Although I was not physically present, they knew that I had constant communication.'*

Participants considered relations as a central construct in articulating care amidst online teaching. Relationship building was depending on teachers' genuineness, initiatives, perseverance, and creative use of different approaches to reaching out to the students by devoting extra time and additional efforts to helping and supporting them, and building mutuality. For example, participants started every online class by greeting students by their names, chitchatting with them, and showing genuine concern about them. They used students' ways of speaking, rather than formal communication styles to engage students in conversations. They also responded to students by using emojis to liven up text messages with smiley faces and faces with heart-shaped eyes. Their commitment to relationship building contributed to



creating an online presence, resulting in engaging students in learning collaboration, and establishing a higher level of trust. The psychologically- and emotionally-secure online context has encouraged students to ask more questions and voice their needs, concerns, and opinions.

*Peony: 'If you want to build relationships with students, it is easy, you can send an announcement, make sure that you are there with them, talk to them more often, extra consultation time, reply to their questions.'*

*Dumbo: 'After class, I used Microsoft Teams to continuously engage in discussions with students, reply to them instantly and solve problems together. I role-played an Android and said, "Android Dumbo again!" The students did not believe that there was a teacher like this. This has generated better relationships and a higher and deeper level of trust.'*

In sum, participants conceptualised that human presence was central to caring about and for students in an online teaching context. In light of the fact that these teachers' teaching experiences were primarily face-to-face prior to the pandemic, they faced challenges **with** the sudden changes to online teaching and were frustrated with certain aspects of online environments. For example, they had to learn to master the skills of using different online teacher platforms. They found the lack of physical presence as a major barrier to caring for their students. They expressed that the inadequate interactions with students and the difficulties in engaging students online were exacerbated by the large class sizes in a virtual environment. They admitted that it was hard for them to remember and recognise each individual student without face-to-face interactions, and this situation was aggravated by having a large number of students in some classes. Furthermore, students could easily hide in a large online class. These issues posed real impediments to caring about and for students amidst online teaching. Despite these difficulties encountered, they were devoted to practising pedagogical caring as motivated by their genuine care and professionalism. They found new ways to embody care through actively building an online presence for collaborating with students to promote their learning. They moreover were dedicated to caring about students' learning and emotional needs by being approachable, considerate, attentive, supportive, and showing respect for students. In spite of experiencing a steep learning curve, they felt satisfied with their pedagogical caring and the online teaching journey. To them, teacher care amidst online teaching was embodied in the quintessence of human care.

## Discussion

This exploratory study investigated university teachers' conceptions and articulation of care amidst online teaching. On the basis of this work, we **conceptualise** a 'caring pedagogy underpinned by a deepening of presence and learning collaboration'. Teacher care is more than an affective disposition or a random act, **but is an** intellectual contemplation, a critical thinking process of discernment, and the subsequent decision-making about pedagogical design and execution concerning how knowledge is better conveyed and opened for scrutiny within the relational zone co-constructed by students and teachers (Goldstein, 1999; Noddings, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Rather than reducing online teaching to a didactic teacher-led method, this research suggests teachers' creative, flexible and effective deployment of technological resources to create a dialectic of synchronous student-teacher interactions amidst online teaching complemented by asynchronous online learning support. Central to this dual approach is university teachers' pedagogical caring behaviours of their volition accommodating students' academic and non-academic needs and empathising with students' feelings and experiences. This purposefully aims to enrich a feeling of human presence and foster a bonded community of learning collaboration during online teaching.

Our research findings have corroborated the centrality of caring university teachers' presence in facilitating students' learning during online teaching. They conceptualise teacher care amidst online teaching as a deepening of human presence. Lacking physical presence creates a real barrier for them to **caring** about and for students. They find it hard to recognise their students as distinct individuals because of the absence of face-to-face interactions, as well as difficulty identifying students' engagement due to the insufficient body language cues in an online class. These challenges are exacerbated by large class sizes, which potentially allow students to either easily hide or be reduced to a 'name' only in a virtual environment. This poses real impediments for caring university teachers to provide care to attend to students' academic and non-academic needs in an online teaching context. To overcome these serious obstacles, they articulate teacher care amidst online teaching by bending every effort to create a sense of presence and foster a supportive community of learning collaboration in an online class setting (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). It is the small human touches attending to students' learning and emotional needs, that embody teachers' presence and care. Caring university teachers engage students in a myriad of caring, inclusive and meaningful dialogues, and genuine, thoughtful and reciprocal interactions by

means of creatively, flexibly and effectively deploying technological resources of their volition. This response-ability of caring teachers summarises the essential notion of what in-person teaching does – it builds on the centrality of community and pro-social and relational behavior that characterises care within teaching (Noddings, 1984, 1992), but it does so using a variety of methods, chosen carefully, and these may well include the selective use of technology. Such intentional behavior on the part of the teacher aims to create a mutuality of presence, promote a dialectic of student-teacher interactions, build up closer relationships and cultivate an agreeable community of collaborative learning, in order to better interconnect affect and cognition for empowering students' learning, knowledge co-construction and holistic development in an online class environment.

Caring university teachers moreover articulate teacher care as empathising with students' feelings and experiences to attend to their academic and non-academic needs. Empathy is articulated as a caring quality and approach to caring about and for students. This line of argument is underpinned by Patton's (1993) discussion of pastoral care in counselling that empathy is an ability and approach to feeling what people have felt and to experiencing what they have experienced, to obtain a better understanding of others' sufferings and needs. In doing so, caring university teachers could better feel students' emotional stress, be aware of their learning difficulties and see their needs during online teaching. They could better individualise support and guidance as much as possible to take care of students' learning and emotional needs. Rather than carrying a negative undertone in the articulation of teacher care, empathy could be a desirable quality and a constructive approach to giving the care to attend to students' needs to deepen teachers' presence and walk students through online teaching.

Caring university teachers are dedicated to deepening a sense of human presence and fostering a bonded community of learning collaboration because their devotion to pedagogical caring is solidly underpinned by their professional identities. This is illustrated by the choices that teachers who espouse caring philosophies have made during the pandemic. A choice of using technology in a particular way to support interaction that cements or promotes learning is a way in which a caring teacher is visibly saying to students that they matter and that they are included in this new vision of the pedagogical practice. A capacity to care is not intended in the parochial sense of skills but as a mark of personhood and entails a commitment and responsibility to act in certain ways (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017; Noddings, 1992). Care that attends to the personhood of the other contributes to shaping the carer's own becoming

(Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2017). By assuming the professional identities and roles of a teacher, caring university teachers are fully committed to upholding their values and principles to provide caring support and guidance to students as much as they could. For example, they persist in creating a feeling of presence by engaging students in in-class discussions and after-class consultations and providing instant support as much as they could via text messaging. Caring about and for the students is gradually becoming their professional identities and devotion, and are increasingly expressing in their professional responsibilities and practices. This has been embodied in caring university teachers’ dedication to deepening presence and learning collaboration.

The advancement of educational technologies has presented a wide repertoire of online resources with versatile interactive attributes for university teachers’ deployment and integration into pedagogy. The use of technologies however must be treated with caution. University students might have pre-conceptions and prior experiences of using certain digital devices limiting their views of those technologies and platforms for leisure or informal learning, rather than for use in formal teaching in an online class setting (Guzman-Simon et al., 2017; Mao, 2014). This has underlined the importance of caring university teachers in well planning their pedagogical strategies and tactics, as well as creatively, flexibly and effectively deploying technological resources to individualise their pedagogical caring behaviors, in order to accommodate students’ learning needs, characters and abilities as much as they could. The enriched technological affordances have provided many new and innovative possibilities for caring university teachers to engage students in synchronous and asynchronous online interactions for promoting a dialectic of affect and cognition in learning facilitation.

Here we pose an introspective question, the rapid advancement and integration of educational technologies into pedagogy might still have limitations in relation to creating a sense of presence and hence constraining the dialectical interactions between teachers and students for promoting learning and development. Whilst digital tools and platforms are enablers and accelerators, technology alone could not cultivate educational transformation or better pedagogy (Evans et al., 2020). This might imply the effects on learning facilitation to a certain extent would depend on whether or not a human teacher is present to engage students in the dialectic of learning collaboration and knowledge co-construction by providing caring support to attend to students’ cognitive and affective needs. Online teaching serves as a platform only, and the use of this pedagogical tool to a certain degree is still conditional on how

human teachers creatively, flexibly, and effectively deploy these technological resources. A didactic teacher-led pedagogy used online is not an excuse for failing to develop students intellectually or holistically. By actively engaging students as a collaborator in co-constructing a mutuality of presence, caring university teachers' pedagogical caring contributes significantly to fostering a caring, trusting, respectful, supportive, and inclusive online context. Predicated upon Noddings' (1984) ethics of care framed within Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, this exploratory study suggests a strengthening of teacher's caring and collaborating role in co-mediating the relational zone for deepening teacher's presence to better promote knowledge co-construction. Overall, we champion **re-conceptualising** the centrality of teacher care embodied in the quintessence of human presence and care, and re-inventing a spectrum of innovative ways for integrating care into the growing prevalence of technologies in higher education pedagogy for students' learning empowerment and holistic growth.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have explored university teachers' conceptions and articulation of care amidst online teaching, contributing to enriching the body of knowledge in this under-researched area. This exploratory study however had a limited sample of participants from the management discipline. This to a certain extent might **have an impact** upon representing academics' views in a wider context. Future research could be conducted with teachers from a diversity of socio-cultural backgrounds and across a range of disciplines in different institutions to broaden the applicability to the wider higher education context. Their perspectives **on** deploying different educational technologies (namely, AI-enabled tutoring systems) moreover could be examined. Furthermore, students' perceptions and outcomes of experiencing teacher care amidst online teaching could be investigated to discern their views on this subject. We do claim the richness and depth of this exploratory research as a guide to its transfer-ability and drawing broader implications for other higher education settings.

On the basis of our findings we suggest that in this stage, technologies could not completely supersede the critical roles of human teachers in making discerning decisions on pedagogical design or deployment of teaching resources for developing students academically or holistically. The rapid advancement of educational technologies and their integration into pedagogy might change the future ecologies of online teaching in higher education. We hope that the data and discussions presented in this paper will promote further research and consideration of care among researchers, teachers, students, administrators, and other

stakeholders to find [better approaches to integrating](#) care into pedagogy for the benefit of our students in this information age.

## References

- Antonenko, P.D., Dawson, K., & Sahay, S. (2017). A framework for aligning needs, abilities and affordances to inform design and practice of educational technologies. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 48(4),916-927.
- Barnacle, R., & Dall’Alba, G. (2017). Committed to learn: Student engagement and care in higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 36(7),1326-1338.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2),77-101.
- Carrillo, C., & Flores, M.A. (2020). COVID-19 and teacher education: A literature review of online teaching and learning practices. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4),466-487.
- Carter, G.C., Westbrook, S.L., & Thompkins, C.D. (1999). Examining science tools as mediators of students’ learning about circuits. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 36(1),89-105.
- Christopher, R., de Tantillo, L., & Watson, J. (2020). Academic caring pedagogy, presence, and communitas in nursing education during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Nursing Outlook*, 68(6),822-829.
- Churcher, K.M.A., Downs, E., & Tewksbury, D. (2014). ‘Friending ’Vygotsky: A social constructivist pedagogy of knowledge building through classroom social media use. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 14(1),33-50.
- Corbera, E., Anguelovski, I., Honey-Roses, J., & Ruiz-Mallen, I. (2020). Academia in the time of COVID-19: Towards an ethics of care. *Planning Theory and Practice*, 21(2),191–99.
- Evans, J.C., Yip, H., Chan, K., Armatas, C., & Tse, A. (2020). Blended learning in higher education: Professional development in a Hong Kong university. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 39(4),643-656.

Francescucci, A., & Rohani, L. (2019). Exclusively synchronous online (VIRI) learning: The impact on student performance and engagement outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Education, 41*(1),60-69.

Fu, H.J., Chu, S., & Kang, W.X. (2013). Affordances and constraints of a wiki for primary-school students' group projects. *Educational Technology and Society, 16*(4),85-96.

Garza, R., & Van Overschelde, J.P. (2018). Instrument development: Faculty caring survey. *The Texas Forum of Teacher Education, 8*,72-85.

Goldstein, L.S. (1999). The relational zone: The role of caring relationships in the co-construction of mind. *American Educational Research Journal, 36*(3),647-673.

Green, W., Anderson, V., Tait, K., & Tran, L.T. (2020). Precarity, fear and hope: Reflecting and imaging in higher education during a global pandemic. *Higher Education Research and Development, 39*(7),1309-1312.

Guzman-Simon, F., Garcia-Jimenez, E., & Lopez-Cobo, I. (2017). Undergraduate students' perspectives on digital competence and academic literacy. *Computers in Human Behavior, 74*,196-204.

Ham, V., & Davey, R. (2005). Our first time: Two higher education tutors reflect on becoming a 'Virtual Teacher'. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 42*(3),257-264.

Kim, M. (2007). A caring perspective on teaching. *The Journal of Yeolin Education, 5*(1),257-279.

LeCompte, M.D., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. San Diego: Academic Press Inc.

Lewis, C.C., & Abdul-Hamid, H. (2006). Implementing effective online teaching practices: Voices of Exemplary faculty. *Innovative Higher Education, 31*(2),83-98.



Lin, X., & Gao, L. (2020). Students' sense of community and perspectives of taking synchronous and asynchronous online courses. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 169-179.

Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

Mao, J. (2014). Social media for learning: A mixed methods study on high school students' technology affordances and perspectives. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33,213-223.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York and London: Teachers College Press.

Noddings, N. (2003). Is teaching a practice? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37(2),241-251.

O'Reilly, M., Levine, D., & Law, E. (2021). Applying a 'digital ethics of care' philosophy to understand adolescents' sense of responsibility on social media. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 39(2),97-107.

Patton, J. (1993). *Pastoral care in context: An introduction to pastoral care*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.

Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Tett, L., Cree, V.E., Mullins, E., & Christie, H. (2017). Narratives of care amongst undergraduate students. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 35(3),166-178.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walker, C., & Gleaves, A. (2016). Constructing the caring higher education teacher: A theoretical framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 54*,65-76.

Walker-Gleaves, C. (2009). *A study of 'Caring' academics and their work within a UK university* (Ed.D. thesis, University of Leicester, United Kingdom).

Watts, L. (2016). Synchronous and asynchronous communication in distance learning: A review of the literature. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 17*(1),23-32.

Wijekumar, K.J., Meyer, B.J.F., Wagoner, D., & Ferguson, L. (2006). Technology affordances: The 'Real Story' in research with K-12 and undergraduate learners. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 37*(2),191-209.

Yin, H.B., & Shi, L. (2021). Which type of interpersonal interaction better facilitates college student learning and development in China: Face-to-face or online. *ECNU Review of Education*,1-28.

**Table 1. Participants' Profiles**

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Disciplines</b>	<b>Years of Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Online Platform Used</b>
Hatice	Female	Turkish	Associate Professor	Management	20 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra
Kitty	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Associate Professor	Management	20 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra; Microsoft Teams; Zoom
Dumbo	Male	Hong Kong Chinese	Teaching Fellow	Computing	9 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra; Microsoft Teams
Acid	Male	Hong Kong Chinese	Teaching Fellow	Engineering	8 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra
Amy	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Instructor	Management	15 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra
Dr D	Male	Hong Kong Chinese	Instructor	Management	10 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra; Microsoft Teams

Penny	Female	Asian	Instructor	Management	9 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra; Zoom
Peony	Female	Thai	Instructor	Management	9 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra; Zoom
Ida	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Instructor	Management	8 Years	Blackboard Collaborate Ultra; Microsoft Teams

**Figure 1. Overarching Theme and Sub-themes of University Teachers' Conceptions and Articulation of Care amidst Online Teaching**

