University Students' Conceptions and Experiences of Teacher Care amidst Online Learning

Anne L. L. Tang[a]*, Caroline Walker-Gleaves[b], and, Julie Rattray[c]

[a] Anne L. L. Tang
School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
17 Science Museum Road, Tsimshatsui East, Kowloon, Hong Kong
E-mail Address: annetang625@gmail.com
*Corresponding Author

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

[b] 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

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 behaviors, higher education pedagogy and inclusive education

[c] Julie Rattray
School of Education, Durham University
Leazes Road, Durham, DH1 1TA, United Kingdom
Email: julie.rattray@durham.ac.uk

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

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Abstract

This qualitative research aims to examine university students' conceptions and experiences of teacher care and its pedagogical implications, premised on ethics of care framed within Vygotskian social constructivism. The COVID-initiated rapid introduction of online learning platform-based study for students, has caused many to critically reflect on teachers' caring behaviors that are possible during physically-embodied pedagogy, but that are either impossible or undesirable online. This has been germane to this phenomenological study utilizing autobiographical narrations to explore undergraduates' caring experiences as informed by their online study. Thematic analysis of their narrations identified four overarching themes, 'Co-creation and Mutuality', 'Tolerance and Attentiveness', 'Practical and Extra Help' and 'Presence and Motivation', representing their conceptions of care. We propose a model of caring pedagogy embodied in '**Co-creation, Response-ability and Presence**' for online learning. This study contributes to enriching the conceptual knowledge of teacher care amidst online learning from university students' perspectives.

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Introduction

During the unplanned changes to online learning **platform-based** study during the global pandemic, the lack of face-to-face encounters has led to a critical reflection on those affective and relational pedagogical behaviours that are possible during physically-embodied pedagogy, yet are either no longer possible or undesirable online (Christopher et al. 2020; **Corbera et al. 2020; Czerniewicz et al. 2020**). A core construct of those relational approaches is the concept of care (Walker-Gleaves 2009; Walker and Gleaves 2016; **Anderson et al. 2019**). Studies have shown that teacher care makes transformative and positive impacts upon university students' learning and behaviours, including increased academic motivation, engagement, resilience and success (Wimpenny and Savin-Baden 2013; Walker-Gleaves 2016; **Anderson et al. 2019**). It is argued in this paper that the sudden changes to online learning might problematize students' experiences of teacher care and the effects on learning, which would be potentially different from face-to-face classroom context.

The promotion of caring pedagogy is **pervasive in the** global higher education settings (**to name a few, Hong Kong, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, United Kingdom), though being** generally marginalized **(Walker-Gleaves 2009; Ng et al. 2012; Walker and Gleaves 2016; Anderson et al. 2019; Corbera et al. 2020; Czerniewicz et al. 2020).** Under the effects of neoliberalism, the higher education sector is undergoing dramatic changes to implementing a managerial culture of accountability and quantifiable **measures** (Lynch 2006; Tett et al. 2017; **Anderson et al. 2019;** Mok and Jiang 2020). It is witnessing serious budget cuts, leading to the fact of permanent academic jobs being increasingly replaced by low-paid, temporary contracts (Lopes and Dewan 2014; Courtois and Keefe 2015). Academics have to work long hours to handle research, teaching and administrative duties. **This neoliberal culture has constricted academics' time and efforts to care** about and for students (**Anderson et al. 2019**). **However**, given the expected increase in using online **platform** or hybrid mode in the post-pandemic context (Christopher et al. 2020; Grant-Smith and Payne 2021), we argue that conducting research into undergraduates' perceptions of teacher care in order to promote integration of care into online pedagogy is timely and pressing. This research thus aims to explore university students' conceptions of teacher care as informed by their online **learning** experiences, and make implications for pedagogy.

Literature Review

Ethics of Care

  Ethics of care serves as a guide for teachers to make ethical decisions about curriculum and pedagogical concerns, and to act ethically to promote students' learning, holistic growth and well-being (Noddings 1984; Goldstein 1999; Fine 2007). **It** promotes teachers' awareness of effects and consequences in moral terms to create a caring and nurturing atmosphere congenial to students' learning facilitation, whilst negotiating with them for a subtle balance of student-teacher relationship and the proper way and healthy distance to care within the regulated professional boundaries and institutional constraints (O'Connor 2008; Walker-Gleaves 2009; Walker and Gleaves 2016). **It** thus is adopted as the main conceptual framework in this research.

Noddings' Ethics of Care

  Predicated upon the feminist ethics, Noddings' (1984) ethics of care is conceptualized as a moral obligation, a caring attitude, a long-term inclusive commitment, and a volitional act devoted to entering into caring relations, and acting compassionately, responsively and morally for the cared-for's growth (Noddings 1984; Goldstein 1999; Kim 2007). It is motivated by a desire for relating to and receiving others, and remaining in caring relationships of receptivity, responsiveness through engrossment, motivational displacement and reciprocity (Noddings 1984; Kim 2007; Velasquez et al. 2013). Receptivity refers to the one-caring's feeling with the cared-for and being open to the resulting pleasure or pain (Kim 2007). The one-caring accepts the other not as an object but as another himself/herself; and this generates strong responsibility for the cared-for (Kim 2007). Engrossment concerns the one-caring's total attention and receptivity to the cared-for during the caring encounter (Noddings 1992; Kim 2007; Hawk and Lyons 2008). The one-caring is seized by the needs of the cared-for, and such a total absorption facilitates motivational displacement (Noddings 1992). Motivational displacement refers to the one-caring's willingness to give primacy to the cared-for's needs and motivation to internalize the cared-for's goals as one's own realities; resulted in an action-oriented drive to act on behalf of the cared-for (Noddings 1992; Kim 2007; Velasquez et al. 2013). Reciprocity is reflected in the cared-for's acknowledgement of the one-caring's care to complete a full caring cycle (Noddings 1984, 1992; Kim 2007; Velasquez et al. 2013). It moreover determines whether or

not the caring act is considered meaningful, serving as the impetus for maintaining the caring work (Noddings 1984, 1992; Kim 2007).

Noddings' (1984) discussion focuses on a web of human-centred, dyadic social relationships, and the power relations steeped in (Bozalek et al. 2021; Gachago and Stewart 2021). It is contextualized to a physical environment, where teachers and students interact face-to-face, and act upon to express and reciprocate care (Noddings 1984). However, **students are increasingly entangled** with teachers and/via technologies **in a multifaceted online environment,** implying that learner-instructor interactions might not be limited to human-human only (Padron-Rivera et al. 2018). Considering this, both the political and posthuman caring approaches challenge human exceptionalism, and redefine the values and practices of care transcending the delimitation of liberal individuals (Bozalek et al. 2021). These two approaches have questioned the parochial view of feminist caring ethics (Bozalek et al. 2021).

Tronto's Political Ethics of Care

Tronto's (1993) political ethics of care concerns the broader politico-societal context (Fine 2007). A caring cycle of five phases, with each of the corresponding moral elements, is proposed (Fisher and Tronto 1990; Tronto 1998, 2013, 2017; Fine 2007; Zembylas et al. 2014; Grant-Smith and Payne 2021). 'Caring about' involves the moral element of 'attentiveness' in noticing and recognizing a genuine need for care (ibid.). 'Caring for' assumes 'responsibility' for care by taking on the burden of responding to an identified caring need beyond being just an obligation (ibid.). 'Care-giving' requires 'competence' in knowing how to care well and perform the caring tasks to meet the recognized caring need (ibid.). 'Care-receiving' calls for 'responsiveness', encompassing the caring responses from the parties involved in feeding back and assessing the effectiveness and adequacy of the caring work (ibid.). 'Caring with' occurs when a group of people have developed the moral qualities of 'trust' and 'solidarity', and can rely on an established pattern of iterative caring practices to meet their caring needs in an ongoing cycle of care (Tronto 2013, 2017; Zembylas et al. 2014; Grant-Smith and Payne 2021). Although this perfect caring cycle might be rarely found in the real-world context because care is fraught with conflicts, power struggles and abuses, it presents a caring ideal to be pursued (Zembylas et al. 2014).

Tronto (1993) appears to portray the care-receivers as a relatively dependent object, involving only in one-way transaction initiated by the care-givers (Fine 2007). This might be

attributable to that her studies mainly focus on the elderly, the infirm and the minor (Fine 2007). Her discussion might not fully capture students' agency role during online learning. Considering this, posthuman ethics of care provides us with a broader view for exploring students, teachers and non-human agents' participatory roles in co-creating learning experiences (Taylor 2017; Gachago and Stewart 2021). To gain deeper insights into the knowledge co-construction process, we would frame the discussion of ethical care within Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivism

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism states that learning is an on-going co-constructing process facilitated by the dialectical interactions between the learners and the more capable others (namely, teachers) in a relational zone. The interplay of cognition and affect leads to knowledge co-construction, independent problem-solving and social development (Vygotsky 1978). Teachers' genuine caring work is found to better facilitate university students' relational dynamics, effecting the emotional-motivational drive to stimulate guided participation and scaffolding, resulted in dialectically promoting cognitive development (Haidet and Stein 2006; Johnson-Farmer and Frenn 2009; Hyland 2010; Garza and Van Overschelde 2018). Literature on the intertwined processes of cognitive development and relational proximity also suggests, 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 (Goldstein 1999; Noddings 2003). This implies that teacher care might be the means by which the cognitive and affective aspects of learning could be better interconnected for knowledge co-construction. Nowadays, teachers utilize online learning platform's versatile interactive attributes to better facilitate the necessary dialogic and collaborative discourses with students to promote guided participation and scaffolding for learning facilitation (Ravenscroft 2001; Churcher et al. 2014). Nevertheless, online learning might create a psychological distance between learners and teachers, posing a hindrance to students' learning (Jung 2006; Ekwunife-Orakwue and Teng 2014; Huang et al. 2016; Bollinger and Halupa 2018).

Predicated upon Moore's (1989) theory, this perceived psychological gap was coined 'transactional distance'. It refers to 'the physical separation that leads to a psychological and communications gap, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner' (Moore 1991, 2-3). It is influenced by a function of dialogue (including learner-content, learner-instructor and learner-learner interactions), structure and learner

autonomy (Moore 1991, 1994; Jung 2006; Ekwunife-Orakwue and Teng 2014; Huang et al. 2016; Bollinger and Halupa 2018). For example, instructor could use synchronous, interactive communication media, which **allow** more intensive, personalized and dynamic interactions with learners, to bridge the transactional distance (Ekwunife-Orakwue and Teng 2014; Huang et al. 2016). However, the effects on reducing the transactional distance might be subject to the learning environment, the individual learners' characteristics and needs, and their perceived instructor's presence, which is referred to the degree to which a person is perceived as real in mediated communication (Ekwunife-Orakwue and Teng 2014). Bringing forward Moore's (1989, 1991, 1994) transactional distance theory would allow us to better envisage the obstacles faced by teachers and students in co-constructing the learning experiences, premised on Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism.

Framing a Synthesis of Ethical Care within Vygotskian Social Constructivism

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism was developed before the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI). The discussion primarily focuses on human as an agent of knowledge co-construction. However, the major breakthroughs in adaptive learning systems **have** far-reaching implications for students' co-construction of learning and knowledge (Padron-Rivera et al. 2018; Martin et al. 2020; Kabudi et al. 2021). For example, the use of AI-enabled **tutoring** system suggests that human facilitators might not be the only agents, or not be involved, in the process of knowledge co-construction (Padron-Rivera et al. 2018). Posthuman ethics of care then suggests ethical attunement and accountability, and giving respect and fair treatment to non-human agents of education (Taylor 2017). Overall, discussions of ethical care have recognized the importance of attentiveness, engrossment, responsiveness, responsibility and reciprocity, underpinned by the core quality of trust (Noddings 1984; Tronto 1998, 2013, 2017). Posthuman ethical care has shifted the focus to response-ability, predicated upon the obligations between humans and non-humans (Gachago and Stewart 2021). Yet, more researches have to be conducted to gain a deeper insight. Framing a synthesis of ethical care **within** Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism would furnish us with a broader perspective for probing into **students' conceptions and experiences of teacher care amidst online learning.**

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study adopted a phenomenological approach utilizing autobiographical narrations to investigate university students' conceptions and experiences of teacher care amidst online learning (Groenewald 2004; Hauk 2005; Lynch and Glass 2020). Autobiographical narrations allowed us to listen to the participants' voices based on their cognitive-affective recollections of experiencing teacher care, and interpretations of meanings situated within the specific contexts of online learning (Hauk 2005; Power et al. 2012; Pitman 2013). Considering phenomenological study derives its narrations from a parsimonious number of interviewees whilst reflecting the collective and nuanced differences in experiences, purposive sampling was employed to identify the potential candidates in a Hong Kong public university (Groenewald 2004; Lynch and Glass 2020). The author sent solicitation emails to all final-year undergraduates personally and via the departmental administrators (i.e. gatekeepers). The email stated the research purposes and solicited those, who were self-identified as having experienced teacher care during the semester of online learning, to participate in the study. Four undergraduates replied with their intention to participate in this research. An information sheet and a written consent form (including explanations on their right to privacy and withdrawal) were sent to them. They confirmed to participate in this research and stayed throughout the whole study period. They were final-year students, majored in management (Table 1):

[Table 1 near here]

Data Collection

Data collection in this study could be described as a 2-stage process. Firstly, each participant was requested to write up an autobiographical narration of teacher care experienced during online learning in the semester studied as below:

- Please write up a short reflective piece of an exemplary case of experiencing teacher care during the online teaching, and state the essential qualities of teacher care that make you feel this is an exemplar of care, and elaborate it with examples

The autobiographical narrations formed solid basis for probing participants' articulation of caring experiences during the in-depth interviews. Interview was adopted as the main data collection method, because it provided a systematic structure to elicit participants' deep

thoughts and rich descriptions to understand their experiences (Seidman 1998; Groenewald 2004; Hauk 2005; Pitman 2013; Lynch and Glass 2020). Open-ended semi-structured interview guide was developed:

Examples of Interview Questions

1) Think of the caring teacher described in the exemplary case, please describe a typical online class delivered by him/her. Please elaborate the most common teaching practice with examples

2) What are the three caring teacher's essential acts to show his/her care to make you experience care during the online learning?

In-depth interviews via Microsoft Teams were scheduled after participants completed online learning in the semester studied to allow them to have a better reflection on the caring experiences, and obtain deeper insights into their views and meaning-making of care. Each of the interviews lasted for 35 to 50 minutes and was recorded with permission. Verbatim transcription was used to maintain the integrity of participants' unmediated, self-disclosed accounts, and minimize any interpretation errors during the analysis stage (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Pitman 2013). Researchers' detailed notes formed another source of empirical data.

Data Analysis

Data-driven thematic analysis **was** adapted for this phenomenological study for analyzing the empirical data (Hauk 2005; Braun and Clarke 2006; Power et al. 2012). Data coding procedures were applied to identifying themes by scrutinizing participants' interview transcripts and written autographical narrations, and researchers' notes. The repeated and salient words, phrases and sentences, which represented the intensity and depth of the caring experiences during online learning, were coded by comparing and contrasting their meanings within participants' interpretations centred on care. More than 200 open codes were emerged after initial coding. Thirteen sub-themes were generated by comparing and contrasting the manifested and hidden relationships among all the codes. These sub-themes were scrutinized to discern the underlying patterns and conceptual meanings for building up four overarching themes (Miles and Huberman 1994; Hauk 2005; Braun and Clarke 2006; Power et al. 2012). Table 2 presented a summary of highlighted open codes, sub-themes and overarching themes demonstrating the conceptual interconnections.

[Table 2 near here]

Research Ethics

The researchers strictly followed research ethics during the whole research procedures. Approval for human subjects' ethics review of this research project was obtained. We engaged in continuous reflexivity on ethical questions raised during the whole processes, including the influences of power relations on students' participation, the ways to address these issues, and the implications for student engagement (Taylor 2015). We used triangulation of methods to ensure neutrality of empirical findings. We continuously exchanged views on empirical analysis (namely, data coding, theme identification) to critically assess and obtain deeper insights into participants' perspectives and meaning-making. Despite the sample size, iterative data analysis procedures resulted in theoretical saturation of participants' views and analytical results. These procedures have foregrounded the centrality of ethics in research, and contributed to strengthening the reliability and credibility of empirical results and established trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Taylor 2015).

Findings

Based on the thematic analysis of university students' **narrations** of teacher care **predicated upon their cognitive-affective recollections and interpretations of meanings situated within the specific** online learning experiences, four overarching themes, 'Co-creation and Mutuality', 'Tolerance and Attentiveness', 'Practical and Extra Help' and 'Presence and Motivation', were identified.

Co-creation and Mutuality

Teacher care amidst online learning was epitomized in co-creation and mutuality. Participants conceptualized that teacher care **was** not unilaterally provided from teacher-centred perceptions of students' needs and wants **during the** online learning **process**. Sue coined the term, '*Co-creation*', to epitomize the quintessence of teacher care, capturing the active and mutual engagement of both teachers and students in the dialectic of co-creating caring actions congenial to students' learning empowerment and holistic development.

Sue: '*Students have to express more about their needs. It is like the trend of "Co-creation" in hotels. The manager encourages the guests to participate more, like*

*selecting the preferred services and amenities. Encouraging **students' participation** will promote a beneficial relational dynamic for both.*'

Though other participants did not use the term, '*Co-creation*', they also stressed on mutuality. Students found it more difficult to express their views during online class. Therefore, they appreciated caring teachers who initiated to collect students' opinions and comments, and genuinely and patiently listened and responded to their needs and wants. For example, some teachers used 'Polling' to understand students' preferences before making decisions on class activities. Being a good listener was in tandem with being open-minded in receiving and accepting different opinions and suggestions, rather than being biased and judgemental of students' honest sharing of their perspectives.

Sue: '*Nowadays, we like expressing our views directly. Teachers should analyze students' problems from different perspectives and suggest the solutions. Teachers should be open-minded and never be biased.*'

Participants emphasized that students had their parts to play in co-creating the caring behaviours and experiences congenial to their learning empowerment and holistic development during online **learning. Contrary to face-to-face class context, they found it more difficult to** raise questions immediately whenever they did not understand the **lecture contents** because of the asynchronous interactions. Even they typed out their questions on 'Chat Box', teachers sometimes missed the questions and proceeded to the next topics without addressing the enquiries. **Teachers** could resort to students' facial expressions and non-verbal cues to tell whether or not students understood the knowledge **in a face-to-face class** and then followed up immediately, **this** could not **be done** during online class. The lack of physical presence and synchronous interactions amidst online learning has rendered students the feelings of helplessness, vulnerability and frustration. Students had to be more initiative in asking teachers questions and express their needs and wants. This might partly explain why participants emphasized the primacy of mutuality and co-creation in receiving the others.

Sam: '*Teacher-student relationships are about a mutuality of understanding and consideration. If both student and teacher help each other, show more consideration for each other, and care about each other, we could create a positive and congenial learning environment.*'

Teacher care amidst online learning was epitomized in students and teachers' co-creation, mutuality and dialectic of caring actions congenial to learning empowerment and holistic development. This might partly explain participants' emphasis on tolerance and attentiveness in exemplifying teacher care.

Tolerance and Attentiveness

Teacher care amidst online learning was exemplified in tolerance and attentiveness. Because of the sudden changes to online learning, participants encountered many difficulties and challenges. Some of the issues were unexpected and beyond their scope of control. Poor and unstable Wi-Fi connection was one of the common problems **affecting their online learning and assessment.** These uncontrollable incidents have rendered them strong feelings of helplessness, vulnerability and frustration. Students thus showed genuine appreciation for those caring teachers who were empathetic and considerate, and attempted to provide assistance and support as much as they could. This might partly explain why participants emphasized the importance of teacher care exemplified in tolerance.

> Sam: *'There were many unexpected problems amidst online learning. For example, students could not present their projects because of technical issues, like Wi-Fi was suddenly disconnected. This was not caused by students' problems, but something beyond their control. Students already felt very helpless, very unhappy, because they worried that this might affect their grades. It is important for teachers to give more tolerance for students.'*

Participants generally agreed on the importance of caring qualities exemplified in **empathy**, tolerance, consideration, **attentiveness and responsibility**. Caring teachers had to put themselves in students' shoes to try their best to understand students' needs and difficulties. Participants elucidated that most students studied six or seven advanced-level subjects in the stressful final semester of undergraduate study whilst coping with the sudden changes to online learning. Given that each subject generally had several assessment components, including **group** report and project presentation, individual assignment, mid-term test and final take-home assignment, this suggested that students' amounts of workload were already heavy and overwhelming, whilst struggling to learn using different online platforms (namely, Blackboard Collaborative Ultra, Microsoft Teams, Zoom). As such, Irene used a metaphor of '*Caring*

teacher is like family members' to exemplify the essential caring qualities of understanding, consideration and attentiveness**, and engrossing** in each member's **needs.** She expected a caring teacher would gradually develop this unstated mutual understanding, show consideration for and attend to students' needs without the necessity of voicing out their **wants** every time.

> Irene: '*A metaphor, like family members. Having lived together and got along with family members, they understand you most, and pay complete attention and provide for your needs.*'

Teacher care was exemplified in an unspoken mutuality of understanding, consideration and attentiveness as though family members. Participants show appreciation and gratitude for teachers who provided especial support and accommodation as much as they could to help them out. This might partly account for participants' emphasis on the significance of teacher care exemplified in teachers' provision of practical and extra help.

Practical and Extra Help

Teacher care amidst online learning was conceptualized as practical and extra help. Practical help was expressed in many different ways ranged from high instructional quality to useful academic and non-academic advice. **Teachers'** instructional quality was considered as the most practical ways to help students achieve academic success during the challenging online learning. Given the lack of physical presence and synchronous interactions in an online environment, participants felt even more boring when teachers just read out from the PowerPoint notes. They acknowledged caring teachers who made dedicated efforts in planning course delivery. This included building a fun classroom atmosphere using fun and games (namely, 'Kahoot!'), which better engaged students during online class, resulted in promoting their knowledge acquisition and deep learning. They also appreciated that caring teachers provided unambiguous and detailed explanation of lectures with many examples, and used their own work experiences to illustrate the applications of conceptual knowledge to real-world situations. They moreover recognized that caring teachers kept checking and monitoring students' knowledge comprehension and study progress. It appeared that teacher care was more than an affect only, but was predicated upon a critical and well thought out pedagogical design for promoting students' learning.

May: '*We were facing the computer already during online learning. Teachers had to be more engaging, have more fun and games, to make online learning more interesting.*'

Teachers' responsive help moreover was regarded as important in expressing teacher care. Participants elucidated the importance of responsiveness **as expressed in quick, quality and detailed replies. Students** sent emails to teachers to ask questions in urgency. They were anxiously awaiting teachers' **feedback** and comments to proceed to improve their assignment for getting better grades. A hasty email reply of brevity, full of errors, and providing irrelevant answers showing sign of misinterpreting students' questions, was not **just** considered by participants as a waste of time. They also saw it as concrete evidence of teachers' indifference and lackadaisical attitudes, showing a lack of genuine care. **Because** students could not physically reach out **teachers to seek** help in the distant online environment, **the perceived lacking teachers' responsiveness and as such care** has rendered participants' feelings of helplessness, vulnerability **and frustration**. **This might partly explain why participants, like** Irene, considered **teachers'** useful and **individualized** comments on group projects **as important** practical help during the online learning.

Irene: '*For my final-year project, my team fell behind at the beginning because we misunderstood the topic. The instructors were very helpful in guiding us step-by-step to get back on track. Whenever we sent them emails, they replied to us on the same day so that we could resume our work. During each consultation, they paid full attention to our explanations on the project, and provided us a clear direction we could follow.*'

Participants understood that academics were juggling **with** research and teaching, and therefore really appreciated for their dedication to caring about and for them. For example, caring teachers spent extra time and **efforts** on providing the additional support (namely, arranging additional consultations). To Sue, extra help was expressed in teachers' useful non-academic support. She sought help from a teacher, who was willing to stay behind the online classes and gave professional and detailed advice on job applications and interview skills. She felt obliged to the teacher for the additional time and efforts to walk her through the application process, because non-academic advice was something beyond the expected teaching responsibilities.

Sam: *'Teach from the heart, the most impressive and important things are, the caring teachers spent considerable time to search additional examples for illustrating the application of the knowledge to real-world situations, making the class more enriching, and making it easier to comprehend the knowledge. Teachers' extra efforts made the whole learning process easier and more relaxing.'*

Teacher care was expressed in practical and extra help to address students' feelings of lacking teachers' physical presence and synchronous interactions amidst online learning. This might partly explain participants' values placed on presence and motivation in manifesting teacher care.

Presence and Motivation

Teacher care amidst online learning was manifested in presence and motivation. Opinions divided on whether or not teachers should show their faces during online teaching. Participants generally preferred teachers' showing faces during online class. Otherwise, they perceived that it was like learning by means of **watching** impersonal and indifferent videos or listening to monotonous audio records. They could still obtain the knowledge, but they found it boring and harder to concentrate on listening to online lectures, resulted in not fully grasping all the key points or engaging in deep learning. However, Sam considered instructional quality (namely, clarity of knowledge delivery, clearness of elaboration, use of real-world examples for illustrating abstract theories) as more important. He expressed that if the teacher read out the PowerPoint notes during online class even **showing one's** face, it would not help his knowledge acquisition or class engagement. Still, he agreed that it would be better for teachers to show their faces when giving feedback during online consultation, because this would create a better and more engaging dialectic. Participants agreed on the importance of showing face amidst online learning to embody teacher's presence, resulted in better engaging students for learning empowerment **and knowledge acquisition**.

Sue: '***Just listening to*** an audio ***was likely*** to be distracted and skip a point. ***If teachers showed their faces***, I would pay closer attention to the online ***lectures***, because ***they were*** really there delivering the subject knowledge.'

Name-remembering was another way to co-create a mutuality of presence by recognizing students' distinctiveness and ascribing significant meanings to their engagement. Participants showed appreciation that teachers greeted students and welcomed them to join the online **class** by addressing their names. This has reflected teachers' caring about students and recognizing each of them as a distinct individual, rather than one of the homogeneous mass. This has motivated students to actively engage in online class.

Sue: '*If the teacher addressed my name, this would show teacher's acknowledgement that, "I know, you are attending my class!" This has made me feel that, there is real meaning attending the online class. It is not facing a monitor, a virtual image. It is because the teacher really addresses my name!*

Presence was mutual and dialectical. Participants sometimes cast doubt on teachers' presence. Teachers' showing faces in online class, addressing students by their names, and responsiveness in answering their questions could be considered as concrete actions to create a feeling of presence **and mutuality** during online learning. More importantly, it was caring teachers' genuine willingness to help students and being within reach to help them out, that have co-created the psychological comfort and assurance, and the felt secure base and always available help, to embody presence and care, giving students a **heart-warming** feeling and an anchor in the distant online environment.

May: '*I wrote a very long email, around 500 words, to ask a long list of questions about PowerPoint notes. The professor did not feel annoyed, and responded to each of my points in detail. He treats students' enquiries very seriously. This is respect. He is also showing respect for his profession.*'

Yet, the feelings of helplessness and distress might be **aggravated** when students could not feel teachers' care, presence and concrete help, especially during online assessment. For example, Sam expressed, **if** students could not conduct group project presentations due to technical issues, they would feel extremely helpless. They felt alone and desolated in the other end of the computer terminal, because they could not get teachers' immediate help or feel their presence. These negative emotions of **vulnerability and** lacking efficacy were prone to be writ **large**, creating the perceptions that one failure in project presentation was as **if a total failure.**

Sam: *'When students could not present their group projects due to technical issues, they perceived that they failed this assessment component anyway, it would not matter if they failed all of the remaining* **assessment.** *The whole learning process was like a* **failure.** *Care is embodied in tolerance, giving more tolerance for students, provide more assistance, care and help to students.'*

Participants expressed that teacher care has exerted positive impacts upon their study. Having experienced teacher care as embodied in teachers' presence amidst online learning, they felt they were better motivated to learn, attend class, listen to lecture, and seek help in academic and non-academic matters. Having a caring teacher to walk them through the challenging and stressful online **study** journey, they **felt** being treated with respect, **found** a sense of meaning and purpose in study**, and** had more confidence in achieving academically.

Sue: *'Some students are lacking motivation as they are unsure of the true meaning of learning. In addition to teaching the knowledge, it is important for teachers to encourage and motivate students during lessons. With the encouragement, students could feel teacher's care and thus would increase the sense of belonging in school.'*

It would be exaggerated to say that if there was a lack of teacher care, students would totally lose the meaning and motivation to study. **They** could study diligently on their own and obtain good results**. However, participants** acknowledged that having a caring teacher to help them out **whenever they were in need** would make them feel more relieved and motivated. Thus, it was still fair to say that teacher care as embodied in teachers' presence did ascribe students a sense of meaning, purpose and existence, promoting their positive coping and well-being in the face of **challenges.** Caring teachers were engrossed in students' concerns and well-being, and showed respect for them, expressed sincere and welcoming attitudes to them, taught them from the heart, and were committed to walking them through the online **study** journey. It was the psychological comfort and assurance, and the felt secure base and always available help as created by teachers' presence and care that gave them an anchor in the distant and indifferent online environment, to address students' feelings of desolation, helplessness and vulnerability.

Sam: *'I use the metaphor of fuel for a caring teacher. Students are like a machine, and can run on their own. But they lack the fuel to operate sometimes. Teacher care is like the fuel to help them operate.'*

Discussion

This research aims to investigate university students' conceptions and experiences of teacher care, **premised on their cognitive-affective recollections and interpretations of meanings situated within the specific** online learning **context**. Based on the overarching themes, we propose a model of caring pedagogy of 'Co-creation, Response-ability and Presence' for online learning (Figure 1). Framed ethics of care within Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, this paper has corroborated that teacher care is a co-creation between university students and teachers built on the teacher's presence and the mutuality of response-ability amidst online learning. Teacher care is more than an affective disposition or a random act, but an intellectual contemplation, critical thinking process of discernment and subsequent **decision-making** on pedagogical design and execution concerning how knowledge is better conveyed and opened for scrutiny within the relational zone co-created by students, teachers and/via technologies (Vygotsky 1978; Goldstein 1999; Noddings 2003; Taylor 2017). Although university students could learn and progress without the physical presence of teachers in an online environment, our research findings have substantiated that teacher care as embodied in co-creation, response-ability and presence contributes to better accommodating students' affective and emotional needs and dialectically engaging them in online learning for promoting their learning empowerment, **knowledge co-construction,** holistic growth, positive coping and well-being.

[Figure 1 near here]

Both Noddings' and Vygotsky's discussions are contextualized to a physical environment where teachers and students could interact face-to-face and respond to each other **immediately. Teachers'** caring behaviors predicated upon the central constructs of receptivity, responsiveness through engrossment and motivational displacement **are** conceptualized as important by students amidst online learning (Noddings 1984, 1992; Kim 2007; Hawk and Lyons 2008; Velasquez et al. 2013). **This** study has unveiled that students place special emphasis on teacher's receptivity when they face the predicaments and challenges, **and** are overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness, vulnerability and frustration because of the perceived lacking teachers' **presence,** response-ability, and **as such care during the** online learning **process**. They do expect having a caring teacher to help them out and walk them through the **online study journey** whenever they are in **need**. It is both the felt psychological comfort and

security, and the presence of practical help and support; that really matter to them. This might suggest teacher care would be the approach to **better** interconnecting the cognitive and affective aspects of online learning by means of engaging both students and teachers in co-creating a mutuality of response-ability to deepen the presence within **the** relational zone **for** promoting university students' **knowledge co-construction** (Vygotsky 1978; Noddings 1984; Goldstein 1999).

University students perceive that their parts in co-creating the caring experiences with teachers amidst online learning **is conditional on teacher's presence and the mutuality of response-ability**. **As learned from the participants' recollected experiences of feeling helpless, vulnerable and frustrated when they perceived that some teachers were not care enough as they expected, they were** likely to recoil from engaging in class, and then **tended** to rely on their own efforts to study and solve the **problems. We do not claim to make generalization about their experiences situated within the particular online context when at the same time they were facing the** social distancing measures. **Their feelings of anxiety, distress and insecurity might be aggravated** by the negative emotions **of depression, desolation and fear suffered** amidst the global pandemic**. Nevertheless, our participants' authentic views do allow us to gain insights into understanding their quandaries and difficulties faced during online learning. For example, they generally perceived that it was more difficult to seek help from teachers as compared with a face-to-face class context.** This might partly explain students' stress laid on caring teachers' response-ability and presence, their engrossment in the aspects of demonstrating a greater degree of tolerance, consideration and attentiveness, and their dedicated time and efforts in bridging the perceived gap of presence. **Our participants' honest sharing of opinions and feelings is telling to prompt us to reflect on how we could better address students' perceptions of lacking teacher's presence and response-ability, and hence resulting in not experiencing teacher care as they expect.** Predicated upon Moore's (1989, 1991, 1994) transactional distance theory, caring teachers could bridge the perceived distance by well designing course structure, promoting constructive dialogue, and empowering students to enhance their autonomy (Ekwunife-Orakwue and Teng 2014; Huang et al. 2016; Bollinger and Halupa 2018).

It is fair to say that even university teachers want to dedicate extra time and efforts in caring about and for students, they might not be able to do so. Under the governance of neoliberalism, the global higher education sector is undergoing major changes to implementing

'new managerialism' model, including institutionalizing individual accountability and quantifiable performance measures (Lynch 2006; Lopes and Dewan 2014; Courtois and Keefe 2015; Tett et al. 2017; **Anderson et al. 2019;** Mok and Jiang 2020). It moreover is witnessing severe budget cuts, resulted in that permanent academic jobs are increasingly superseded by low-paid, temporary contracts (Lopes and Dewan 2014; Courtois and Keefe 2015). This has reduced the educators to a group of invisible, precarious, underpaid and functional precariat, lacking job security and proper remuneration (Lopes and Dewan 2014; Courtois and Keefe 2015). Those academics remained are facing an intensified competition among universities for higher rankings. They have to generate more external research funding and publications to be awarded tenure contracts and gain career advancement (Lynch 2006; Tett et al. 2017). **This neoliberal higher education context has shaped teachers' work, constraining their time and capacity to give** care and support to **attend** to students' needs, **even they want to do so** (Tett et al. 2017; **Anderson et al. 2019**). Overall, on an institutional level, this research champions the promotion of caring culture in higher education sector to curb neoliberal governance. On an individual level, this study advocates a caring pedagogy of 'Co-creation, Response-ability and Presence' for online **learning.**

This research would pose a reflection question that **existing** technologies might still have limitations on catalyzing the dialectic between university students and teachers for promoting learning and growth. This might suggest the effects on learning facilitation would be to a certain degree depending on whether or not a human teacher is present to **engage** students in the **process of** knowledge co-construction, whilst providing the emotional support and felt security, to address students' both cognitive and affective needs. Online learning serves as a platform only, and the use of this pedagogical tool to a certain extent is conditional on how this teaching aid is well utilized by human teachers. A poorly-designed didactic teacher-led pedagogy used online is not the panacea for solving the problem of failure in developing students intellectually or holistically. In this stage, technologies could not replace the criticality of human presence and care **in the co-constructing process of learning and knowledge**.

The rapid advancement of **technologies** and its integration into pedagogy might change the future ecologies of online learning **in** high education sector**, and challenge the parochial view of feminist caring ethics (Bozalek et al. 2021). The significant breakthroughs in adaptive learning systems have wider implications for students, teachers and non-human agents' participatory roles in co-constructing learning experiences and knowledge**

(Taylor 2017; Padron-Rivera et al. 2018; Martin et al. 2020; Gachago and Stewart 2021; Kabudi et al. 2021). The use of AI-enabled tutoring system and the like engages students in the multifaceted entanglement with teachers and/via non-human agents, suggesting that human facilitators might not be the only ones, or not be involved, in the process of knowledge co-construction (Padron-Rivera et al. 2018). This might imply that it is increasingly important to consider students' entanglement with human and non-human agents in the co-creation of caring experiences underpinned by a mutuality of response-ability to deepen the presence, in order to better interconnect the cognitive and affective aspects of online learning for promoting students' learning empowerment and knowledge co-construction. This moreover suggests re-defining our obligations to non-human agents of education, by being better attuned to and giving fair respect and treatment to them (Taylor 2017; Gachago and Stewart 2021). **Overall, this study calls** for more researches and dialogues among **students,** researchers, academics, administrators **and other stakeholders** together to find optimal ways to integrate care into pedagogy predicated upon posthuman ethics of care.

Conclusion

Given the expected increase in using online learning or hybrid mode in the post-pandemic context, this paper aims to explore university students' conceptions and experiences of teacher care amidst online learning. Framed ethics of care within Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, four overarching themes of 'Co-creation and Mutuality', 'Tolerance and Attentiveness', 'Practical and Extra Help' and 'Presence and Motivation' were identified. Based on the overarching themes, this research proposes a model of caring pedagogy of 'Co-creation, Response-ability and Presence' for online **learning. We** might not generalize the results to represent university students in a wider context because of a limited sample size. We do claim the richness and depth of the study **as informed by the participants' cognitive-affective recollections and interpretations of meanings situated within the specific context could serve as** a guide to **our reflections on how university students perceive, experience and expect teacher care during** online learning**, and therefore how academics could better integrate care into online pedagogy in a wider** higher education **context.**

Despite that the growing influences of neoliberalism on higher education sector globally might pose a major hindrance to integrating care into pedagogy, **existing literature and our empirical findings have shown that** there are caring teachers who **dedicate** time and efforts

to giving care to students. Nevertheless, without the proper established higher education policies and cultures, **teachers might be limited by their time and capability to provide** care to attend to students' needs, **whilst juggling with their research, teaching and administrative duties. This paper** thus advocates promoting a culture of caring about and for our students and **teachers** in higher education sector**, whilst administrators and policy-makers could provide more institutional support.**

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Table 1. Participants' Profiles

Student	Gender	Ethnicity	Year	Discipline
Irene	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
May	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Sue	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Sam	Male	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management

Table 2. Summary of Open Codes, Sub-themes and Overarching Themes of University Students' Conceptions and Experiences of Teacher Care amidst Online Learning

Open Codes (Highlighted)	Sub-Themes	Overarching Themes
- Teachers and students are co-creators of teacher care; - Co-creation; - Mutuality; - Mutual help; - Mutual consideration; - Mutual care; - Mutual respect; - Two-way; - Friendly, casual and harmonious teacher-student relationships; - Building up teacher-student relationships and bonding	Co-creation and Mutuality	Co-creation and Mutuality
- Teachers' initiatives; - Initiative in inviting students to ask questions; - Initiative in collecting students' opinions and suggestions; - Initiative in offering academic help; - Initiative in offering non-academic help; - Encourage; - Encourage students to seek help from teachers; - Teachers' open-mindedness	Teachers' Initiatives	
- Students' initiatives; - Initiative in asking questions;	Students' Initiatives	

- Initiative in expressing needs and wants; - Students' willingness to learn; - Students' participation; - Students' open-mindedness; - Not expect professors to babysit students		
- Tolerance; - Considerate; - Empathy; - Encounter difficulties and unexpected issues during online learning; - Technical problems; - Students' needs; - Understand students' needs, difficulties, unexpected challenges and situations; - Take students' workload and difficulties into consideration; - Listen to students' needs, views and opinions; - Value students' opinions and comments in response to addressing their needs	Tolerance	Tolerance and Attentiveness
- Attentiveness; - Respect; - From the heart; - Genuine; - Engrossment; - Care about; - Care for; - Emotional care; - Sincere attitudes; - Welcoming; - Treat students' questions seriously;	Attentiveness	

▪ Teachers do not feel annoyed		
▪ Interaction; ▪ Engaged; ▪ Discussion; ▪ Stimulate; ▪ Teaching methods; ▪ Explain; ▪ Clear and detailed explanation; ▪ Explain with examples and applications to real-world situations; ▪ Keep explaining until students clearly understand; ▪ Make sure students clearly understand subject knowledge; ▪ More relaxing, smooth and better learning process; ▪ More relaxing and fun learning atmosphere	Instructional Quality	Practical and Extra Help
▪ Help; ▪ Help students; ▪ Practical help; ▪ Helpful; ▪ Support; ▪ Clear and updated guidelines; ▪ Clear and useful guidance; ▪ Consultation; ▪ Advice; ▪ Feedback; ▪ Solve problems; ▪ Keep track of learning progress	Practical Help	

- Reply to email; - Reply to email quickly; - Quick response; - Detailed response; - Quality response; - Willingness to answer students' questions	Responsive Help	
- Extra; - Extra care; - Extra support; - Extra materials; - Extra time; - Extra efforts; - Follow-up; - Non-academic support; - Non-academic consultation; - Non-academic advice	Extra Help	
- Teachers' presence; - Students' presence and existence; - Address, remember and recognize students' names; - Difficult to provide care because of online, coupled with large class size; - Cannot remember or recognize students' faces or names; - Cannot know or recognize which student is voicing out opinions; - Cannot know whether or not students understand; - Difficult to understand students' needs; - Difficult to arrange individual consultation with each of students;	Presence, Existence and Meaning	Presence and Motivation

▪ Meaningful to attend class; ▪ Meaningful to learn		
▪ Psychological comfort; ▪ Always available for consultation (24/7 consultation); ▪ Caring teacher is a supporter; ▪ Feeling of having support; ▪ Feeling that teachers will definitely help; ▪ Togetherness; ▪ Not on one's own; ▪ Feel comfortable; ▪ Feel happy; ▪ Feel heartwarming; ▪ Teachers' help with relieve stress; ▪ Make students feel less anxious	Psychological Comfort	
▪ Caring teacher is like fuel; ▪ Learning facilitation; ▪ Motivation; ▪ Better motivation and more willing to learn; ▪ Better motivated to attend class; ▪ Better motivated to listen to lecture; ▪ Better understand subject knowledge; ▪ Better academic performances; ▪ Better motivated to ask academic questions; ▪ Better motivated to ask non-academic questions; ▪ Contribute to developing students' talents	Motivation	

- Fear; - Feel anxious; - Stressful; - Confused; - Helpless; - Perceived failure; - Perceived a failed learning process; - Feel losing everything and not caring about anything anymore; - Enduring; - Feel unhappy; - Feel annoyed; - Feel ignored; - Not respectful; - Lack of responsibilities; - Lackadaisical attitudes	Negative Feelings because of the Perceived Lack of Teacher Care	

Figure 1. Model of Caring Pedagogy of University Students' Conceptions and Experiences of Teacher Care amidst Online Learning

Students **Teachers**

Co-creation

Response-ability

Presence