

Chapter 7.2

Caring in the Zone: Fostering Relationships in Virtual Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

A focus on interpersonal relationships and the creation of caring, democratic learning experiences may cause some to reject virtual learning environments because of a belief that physical proximity is necessary for the building of substantial relationships. Despite this concern, a carefully crafted 3D immersive learning environment can provide similar interpersonal experiences, and can foster the creation of caring relationships in ways that are often difficult in face-to-face settings. Based on more than nine years of work in Appalachian State University's Appalachian Educational Technology (AET) Zone, this chapter creates a case based on Noddings' framework for the ethic of care, and argues that virtual learning environments can meet and exceed these conditions.

INTRODUCTION

While many argue that online instruction has the potential to transform teaching and learning, it remains an open question whether or not virtual learning environments can nurture the educational relationships that support emancipatory educational goals. Feminists in particular have

argued that democratic approaches to classroom relationships support the empowerment of learners to become active participants in critical analysis of social justice issues (Bonifacio, 2008; Fletcher, 2000; Walkerdine, 1990). As a result, they advocate pedagogical strategies that consciously attend to the development of ethically focused relationships amongst all the participants in classroom inquiry. Such a focus on interpersonal relationships may

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cause some to reject virtual learning formats and to favor in-person experiences because of a belief that substantial relationship building requires physical proximity. We share the perspective that relationally focused teaching and learning is a vital part of emancipatory education, but we also argue that virtual learning communities can foster significantly important educational relationships that support social justice-focused critical analysis in unique ways. When carefully crafted, virtual learning environments not only provide similar interpersonal resources as those found within traditional classrooms, but they can also foster the creation of educational relationships in ways that are not as easily constructed in face-to-face (F2F) classrooms.

To make our case clear, we ground our discussion within a paradigmatic theoretical framework of educational interaction—that of Nel Noddings’ (Noddings, 1984, 2002a, 2002b, 2005) articulation of caring relationships within the ethic of care. As a starting place for conceptualizing what might be possible in virtual learning environments focused on relational learning, Noddings’ work offers a particularly challenging framework from which to begin because her conception of the caring relationship seemingly requires agents to be physically present with one another. We argue that even Noddings’ most demanding form of caring interaction may indeed be possible in virtual environments; furthermore, such environments may foster caring relationships in ways that many current iterations of face-to-face classrooms may not allow. Such a conclusion has important implications for the design of virtual learning environments, but more importantly, for liberatory educational programs of all sorts, virtual or not.

The chapter is organized in three sections. After an introduction to the general argument, we briefly introduce Noddings’ (Noddings, 1984, 2005) definition of caring, concluding with key implications for constructing learning environments focused on providing opportunities for students and teachers to develop caring relationships.

We then introduce the virtual learning approach being pioneered by faculty at Appalachian State University in North Carolina (Bronack, et al., 2008; Cheney, Sanders, Matzen, & Tashner, 2009) and discuss its relationally-focused pedagogical philosophy. In the final section, we make connections between the described approach to online instruction and the features of Noddings’ theory of caring interactions, developing the argument that virtual learning environments can support the development of highly relational learning. We also explore the stronger conclusion: Virtual learning environments may offer opportunities for the development of caring relationships in ways that are significantly and importantly different from what is possible in traditional classrooms. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this argument for educational efforts aimed at social justice.

THE ETHIC OF CARE

In a dramatic break with traditional approaches to ethics, Nel Noddings (Noddings, 1984, 2005) builds the ethic of care upon the ontological primacy of relationships. Rather than beginning with abstract justice principles or agent-centered virtues, care theory stresses the phenomenological aspects of moral encounters. Noddings argues that caring is not about projecting benevolent thoughts of good will onto abstract others. It purposefully avoids what can be perceived as formulaic remedies seen in justice-based solutions to ethical problems. Doing so shifts the focus of ethical engagement away from abstract reasoning and onto the particularities of individual circumstances. It grounds the resolution of moral problems within the deceptively simple aim of always seeking to develop and maintain caring relationships in any moral situation.

Despite the break with traditional moral theory, Noddings does not characterize caring as entailing an all or nothing choice. Instead of completely

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