

Chapter 6

Enhancing Adult Online Learners' Graduate Leadership Experiences Through the Lens of Care Theory

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how instructors can leverage Nel Noddings' care theory (1986, 2002, 2013, 2019) in order to design and deliver learning experiences which support the unique needs of adult online learners who are studying leadership in impactful ways. This chapter will also explore the ways in which online instructors may be seen as facilitators or coaches who use mental models of care theory to anticipate and positively guide relationships within the online learning environment through instructional and advising practices. This chapter will describe how online instructors may strategically use a care theory framework of modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation to guide adult learners through different stages of the learning experience, in order to contribute to a caring and relational dynamic which drives students' learning outcomes and leadership capacity.

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INTRODUCTION

The shift from traditional in-person classroom learning to legitimized programs of online learning for adult degree-seeking professionals has opened significant access and opportunity for institutions of higher education, as well as for the adult learners they serve. However, this ongoing dramatic increase in online graduate degree offerings has posed challenges to educators and students. One of the most significant challenges is building and maintaining strong connections, and a sense of authentic support, amidst the participants within the online learning environment. It is well documented that relationships and a sense of emotional connection within a learning environment play a crucial role in positively impacting student learning outcomes (Pekrun, et al., 2011; Scherer, 2009; Mega, et al., 2014). The absence of physical presence in online classrooms does not mitigate this need; in fact, it may amplify it.

This chapter aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how instructors can leverage Nel Noddings' care theory (Noddings, 1984, 2002, 2013, 2019) in order to design and deliver learning experiences which support the unique needs of adult online learners who are studying leadership in impactful ways. This chapter will also explore the ways in which online instructors may be seen as facilitators or coaches who use mental models of care theory to anticipate and positively guide relationships within the online learning environment through instructional and advising practices. This chapter will describe how online instructors may strategically use a care theory framework of modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation to guide adult learners through different stages of the learning experience, in order to contribute to a caring and relational dynamic which drives students' learning outcomes and leadership capacity.

NODDINGS THEORY OF CARE: AN OVERVIEW

Nell Noddings' theory of care offers profound insights into the ethical and relational dimensions of education, particularly emphasizing the importance of caring relationships between educators and students. Rooted in feminist ethics, Noddings' work challenges traditional notions of moral education by positioning care at the center of ethical understanding and educational practice. In her seminal work "Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education," Noddings (1984) introduces care theory, which is built on the fundamental premise that human beings are relational and interdependent. Noddings (1984) theory identifies a trilogy of essential care components: engrossment in the other, displacement of one's own motives, and recognition. The carer must be deeply invested in the position and motivations

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