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Investing in Connection: Exploring the Online Graduate Student Experience

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Investing in Connection: Exploring the Online Graduate Student Experience

Abstract:

Within the context of online learning, there are challenges presented by the virtual medium that may lead to diminished experiences in learning. Without a physical connection or the ability to feel the support from your teacher, online students can be left isolated, and the pedagogy can easily slip into an execution of tasks as opposed to a pedagogy of care. My inquiry into the online graduate student experience began with a survey to understand how online graduate students describe their experiences as an online learner and their relationships with their instructors. A thematic analysis of their responses revealed themes regarding the relationship between the instructor and student and the role of communication in the quality of that relationship. To further explore these themes, an action research cycle was then completed within my own teaching to initiate some of the pedagogical ideas shared by graduate students. Results from initial survey and the resulting action research cycle are shared and discussed.

Online teaching in higher education has spiked tremendously since the pandemic began in March 2020, however the trend towards online graduate degree offerings was growing steadily even prior to the pandemic. Moving a program fully online requires consideration in multiple areas; online coursework, student support and advising, and professional development for instructors to build capacity to teach online. Within my own context, we made the decision to “go online” in 2014 and have been evolving as an online program since that time. This inquiry into the online graduate student experience within our program occurs both at the programmatic level as well as the individual instructor level to gain more clarity on the experience of our students as well as how we can impact that experience as instructors.

Garrison and colleagues (2000) proposed a theoretical model that introduced three presences – social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence – as primary elements for successful online education. The three presences are dependent on each other for a successful experience online. Social presence is defined as “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people (i.e. their full personality), through the medium of communication being used” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 94). Cognitive presence is the extent to which participants (students) can construct meaning through their communication experiences and teaching presence is the design and facilitation of those educational experiences for meaningful student outcomes. Cognitive presence occurs when teaching and social presence are well developed, and the development of social presence is dependent on how well the teaching presence has been established. For my own line of inquiry, I believe social presence may be a necessary component of the online experience for students to feel that they are a valued member of the community. It is interesting to note that the research seems to discuss social presence as the “glue” between teaching presence and cognitive presence. Thus, if the goal of creating a strong sense of social presence includes creating a community in which students feel comfortable to be their “real” selves, then it is necessary to figure out what instructional strategies or pedagogical tools support students feeling comfortable to be themselves.

There is significant research that identifies and isolates aspects of online teaching that support student success in online learning in higher education (Bailey & Card, 2009; Garrison et al., 2000; Sun & Chen, 2016). Although much of this research uses traditional measures of

student success (achievement), it is helpful to see if there may be teaching strategies that support achievement as well as the construction of a community of inquiry that supports a strong social presence and may deepen the online student experience. Bailey and Card (2009) built from the seminal work of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles of effective practice in undergraduate teaching in their phenomenological study of award-winning eLearning faculty. Their work proposes eight effective teaching practices for online educators: fostering relationships, engagement, timeliness, communication, organization, technology, flexibility, and high expectations. As I seek to deepen my knowledge on practices in online learning, I am drawn to their discussion on how eLearning faculty are fostering relationships in their practice. The authors identify instructors' empathy for students, passion for teaching, and willingness to help students succeed as key factors for fostering relationships (Bailey & Card, 2009). While these are helpful pedagogical objectives, there is significantly more to understand about *how* educators can demonstrate empathy, passion, and willingness to help to their online students.

In practice, educators need to have sound equitable teaching practices (teaching presence) to create a community of inquiry in which students felt comfortable and safe being vulnerable and expressing their opinion (social presence). As a result, a higher level of cognitive engagement and critical thinking can occur in the online medium (cognitive presence). If teaching practices are the foundational aspect to developing cognitive engagement in online learning, a closer examination of the research in this area is necessary.

Sun and Chen (2016) reviewed 47 published studies to determine that effective online instruction is dependent upon 1) well-designed course content, motivated interaction between the instructor and learners, well-prepared and fully supported instructors; 2) creation of a sense of online learning community; and 3) rapid advancement of technology. They found that numerous studies supported a strong correlation between social interaction and sense of community in achieving success in online learning. However, upon completion of their review, they determined that "although many studies emphasized the importance of creating such a learning community, they lacked effective and detailed means, approaches, and technologies that could be used to achieve that objective (p. 171)."

After reading a myriad of studies completed in the field, I struggled to gain a clear picture of how this community-oriented teaching *looks* in the online medium. Faculty at University of Wisconsin-Green Bay had similar questions and, to aid instructors in their mindfulness of equity-minded and inclusive teaching practices in online courses, they built from work completed by the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education (CUE) to create a method for analyzing and aligning course design and instruction with the goals of equity and inclusivity. Their rubric identifies six principles; inclusivity, respect for diversity, values diverse life experiences and ways of knowing, advocates high expectations for all students, accessibility, and continuous improvement and self-evaluation to assist instructors in analyzing their online course curriculum and instruction. The detail included in this rubric gives instructors a meaningful place to begin work on their online pedagogy. It is also my belief that creating an online community of learners where students can be an authentic version of themselves may support feelings of equity among students and, as a result, deepen the learning experience.

Role of the Researcher

As a living educational theorist, I ground research and teaching to my core values and work to understand (through action research) how I can improve my practice and better align to

those core values. Working from a definition of living-theory as “an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work” (Whitehead, 2008, p. 104), I identify key theories and scholars who, along with my own educational experiences, have informed the creation of a framework that Brock (2005) refers to as a ‘pedagogy of wholeness,’ which recognizes the inadequacy of one pedagogy to capture all the unique goals of a single educator in their context. The relationship between living theory and action research is symbiotic, as I use action research cycles to investigate the presence of my living theory values within my practice (Shrestha, 2021). The findings from action research investigations then inform and further develop my understanding of the ways in which my living theory values are present within my practice.

This current inquiry connects to my own living educational theory through my values of connection and care in my practice (Vaughan, 2019). As an educator, I strive to develop meaningful connections with those around me and examinations of my practice show that I infuse humanizing characteristics like vulnerability into my practice to create pathways for connection. I describe this further in a 2019 publication:

As a classroom teacher, I worked in an inclusion setting, focusing on weaving together the various abilities and disabilities in my classroom to create a community of trust where each member felt comfortable and experienced academic and social growth. Those early experiences taught me the value of human connection and the profound impact a relationship with a caring teacher can have on a student’s life. While my current students are adults, often teaching in their own classrooms full-time and taking their graduate courses online at night, the value of connection and the importance of building those authentic relationships are just as important. Through my work, I use action research to provide teachers with opportunities to build and sharpen the dispositions that create reflective and collaborative teacher leaders. (Vaughan & Delong, 2019, p. 69)

While there are several definitions of connection that exist, Brown’s description (2010) of connection as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (p. 19) resonates most with me. I find additional support for my core values through the ideas of caring and engrossment by Nel Noddings (2005). Engrossment is the total and complete focus on the other individual at that moment in time, the act of truly listening, caring and an overwhelming feeling of wanting to help or connect with that individual to move them closer to their expressed goals. Her seminal work in the field of caring as a pedagogy was instrumental in my own development as an educator and theorist. Furthermore, bell hooks (2014) explains that “as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence” (hooks, 2014, p. 8). In order to do that, “teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings, even if the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition. Yet the possibility of such recognition is always present” (p. 13). This approach to teaching and creating relationships with students is described by hooks as engaged pedagogy and creates space for multiple voices in a classroom, ensuring that all members of the classroom community are empowered and seen.

Methods

As previously mentioned, this work is grounded in the methodology of living educational theory (Whitehead, 2008). Living theory is an explanation of an individual's educational influence in their own as well as other's learning and in the understanding of the social formation of the context where they live and work. Strestha (2021) further explains that

Living theory action research establishes the relationship between the individual and the social context with the explicit use of action-reflection cycles in moving forward the inquiry that includes the expression of concerns if the values of the individual are lived fully in practice or not. (p. 20)

This inquiry occurred in two phases; phase one sought to further understand the current experiences of online graduate students within a particular program and phase two integrated the newly gained knowledge about online graduate student experience into my own practice to further explore the ideas shared as well as assess the impact changes in practice may have on online graduate students. This inquiry took place at a public university in the United States.

Phase One

Phase one of this inquiry began with a survey to understand how online graduate students describe their experiences as an online learner and their relationships with their instructors. To gather initial information, a brief survey was sent to all graduate students enrolled in an online master's in education program to provide information about their online learning experiences. The objective was to ask students to discuss their online learning experiences and identify course experiences that have supported or negated meaningful learning in their online coursework.

Initial survey participants (n=18) were all enrolled in a graduate master's in education program at the university. Most students enrolled in this graduate program are currently classroom teachers pursuing an additional degree in their field. They have significant background in education, so their pedagogical knowledge base also helped to contribute to the complexity of their answers. The following questions were sent out to students as open-ended response survey questions:

- What online teaching practices have helped to deepen your learning?
- How can relationships/connections between the instructor and student be strengthened online?
- What makes you feel comfortable (able to be yourself) in an online course?
- How can professors demonstrate that they support you in your coursework?
- How can professors build a sense of community within your courses?
- What challenges or barriers to learning do you experience in your online courses?
- How can professors demonstrate respect for diverse knowledge and learning in an online course?
- What makes you feel valued for the unique knowledge/value you bring to an online course community?

The initial survey received eighteen responses from graduate students. Following the analysis of survey results, key instructional strategies were then integrated into my own online

teaching practice in an action research cycle to assess their impact on my online graduate students' feelings about their learning experience (phase two).

Phase One Data Analysis

There are several data sources used in this inquiry. As previously described, survey data contributed to an initial understanding of online graduate student experience and experiences that contributed to meaningful learning experiences in their program. Survey data was open-coded by question, looking for shared and similar experiences reported by students. After question-level analysis, categories of larger ideas were formed from questions that yielded similar responses (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). For example, similarities were seen in student responses from questions that asked about how professors demonstrate support and respect. Categories were then analyzed for larger themes to glean some insight into how individual experiences relate to instructional practices and recommendations for instructors. For example, students were asked about how relationships can be strengthened and what makes them feel comfortable in online courses in separate questions. These responses led to similar ideas that could be synthesized under the first theme of *evidence of investment*, as explained below.

Phase One Findings

The initial survey to graduate students revealed some key insights into their experiences as online learners and their definitions of meaningful online teaching practices. Through an analysis of their responses to the questions previously listed, clear ideas emerged regarding the relationship between the instructor and student and the role of communication in the quality of that relationship. Subsequently, it was clear that the relationship between instructor and student greatly impacted their ability to “be themselves” in the course and engage in a meaningful way. The following themes represent the ideas expressed by survey results.

Evidence of Investment. Students reported that professors demonstrate respect, strengthen relationships, and make them feel valued through repeated evidence of their investment in the course experience and individual students. In practice, this shows up in varied instructional strategies. Most frequently, this can be seen (both positively and negatively) in the timeliness of professor response and assignment feedback. Students reported that timeliness in response was indicative of the professor’s “willingness to communicate” with students. This willingness to engage with students in a timely manner was frequently mentioned to build stronger relationships between instructors and students. This same idea shows up in the literature as “willingness to help” and is linked to equity-minded practices (University of Wisconsin, 2015) and fostering relationships (Bailey & Card, 2009). Students gave additional examples of practices that can be categorized as evidence of investment, such as teacher involvement on discussion boards and virtual office hours. However, timely communication was, by far, mentioned most frequently as evidence of an instructor’s investment in their personal learning experience.

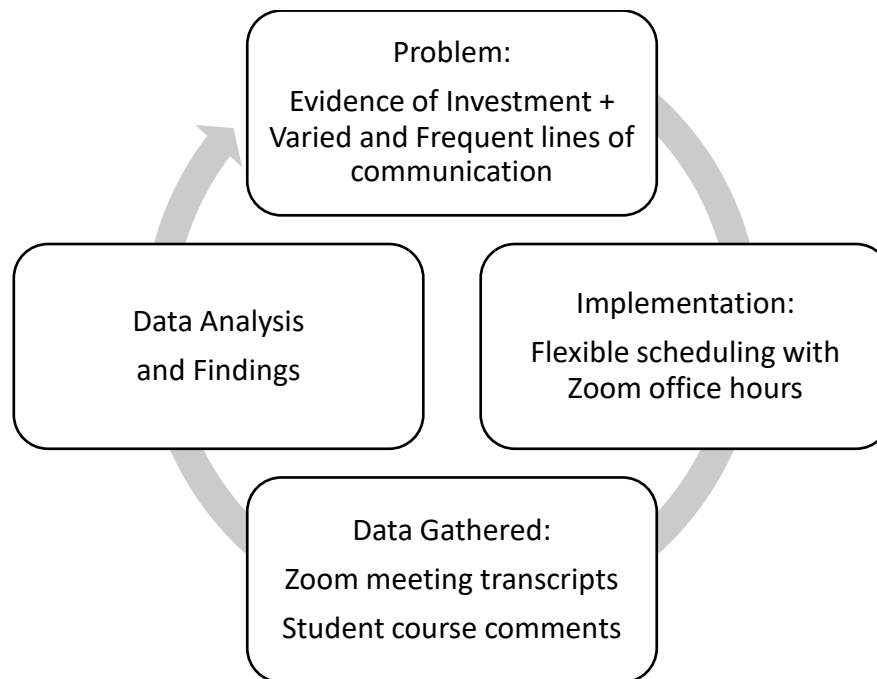
Varied and Frequent Lines of Communication. Students reported that professors could honor the diversity in their knowledge, make them feel comfortable, and demonstrate support through “varied and frequent lines of communication.” This is an interesting practice to consider because it can counter some logical thinking about setting clear communication expectations for students to avoid confusion. Traditionally, some instructors may believe it is best to communicate using one method to avoid confusion for online students. However, the intent, as

explained by student responses, behind employing varied lines of communication is to create diversity in learning and relationship-building opportunities. For example, students asked for opportunities to communicate with their instructor through the discussion board, assignment feedback, whole group synchronous sessions, and small group/individual sessions. The varied nature of these opportunities honors the time constraints and learning preferences that graduate students have. In practice, instructors can reflect on how they are showing up in ways to communicate with their students. Is it only through personal email? Have they met with them as small groups? Are there opportunities for the entire class to come together to learn? The answers to some of the questions, as it did for me, can identify the gaps in communication and missed opportunities for connections with students.

Respond, not React. In their responses to the survey, students explained *how* professors respond to communication requests, questions, or problems can directly impact how the students perceive they are valued by their professor. For example, students shared experiences about professors responding to questions with “insulting comments” or “shade.” While these experiences were not prevalent, it is important to consider that *how* we say something in an online environment can be more important than, or potentially overshadow, *what* we say because a virtual experience may lack nonverbal cues and the ability to “see” the impact of your words on those around you. Bailey and Card (2009) highlighted empathy as a practice to foster relationships in online teaching and the responses we craft to online students are opportunities to demonstrate empathy within an online course. Interestingly, students recommend that professors make explicit declarations of support as ways to show their intentions and make them feel valued. Proactively responding to all students with messages of support (before being asked for help) and engaging in problem-solving communication from a place of caring are instructional practices that can be seen as equity minded. These practices are also echoed and detailed as a principle of inclusivity in the work completed by the University of Wisconsin (2015).

Phase Two

After reflecting on the alignment of the survey results with my own core values of connection and caring in my teaching, I implemented an action research cycle that would allow me to explore how I can improve my own practice and the experiences of my online graduate students. Generally defined, action researchers are “engaging in a continuous process of problem posing, data gathering, analysis, and action” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 40). Repeating these steps creates action research cycles that are used to address problems of practice and create alignment between my living educational theory values and practice. Figure 1 outlines the cyclical steps taken within phase two to address some of the phase one findings.

Figure 1*Action research cycle of implementation****Phase Two Implementation***

Within my graduate capstone research course (n=15), I chose to immediately implement Zoom-based office hours using a flexible scheduling approach. I felt I could strengthen my *evidence of investment* and *varied and frequent lines of communication* using this instructional strategy. In previous action research inquiries, I have examined the role of feedback and communication in my practice (Vaughan, Baxley, & Kervin, 2017), but I recognized that I could highlight my investment in the learning experiences of my students through an additional mode of contact.

Beginning in the 4th week of the semester, I set up a flexible scheduling link (Doodle) and messaged it to students, giving them the option of signing up for four different Zoom times the following week for additional help, conversation, or questions. Out of 15 students enrolled in my course, I had five students sign up within 24 hours. As an experienced online educator, it was eye-opening to me that a third of my class immediately wanted to partake in additional class meetings. Also, it is important to note that the intentions for attending varied (as they shared), three students attended to hear about upcoming assignments and connect with me and their peers and two students attended to receive help on previous assignments that they were revising. I met with one student individually and four others as a group (based on times they self-selected). Following the group meeting, I engaged in a discussion about why they attended virtual office hours and how this practice supported them in their learning experiences in the course.

Phase Two Data Analysis

In phase two, transcripts from Zoom classes were collected as evidence of the teaching practices employed. These video transcripts include valuable student perspectives for me, as a practitioner, and using video to capture instruction and student input mitigates bias in my own observation of the student experience. Again, data were open-coded and transcripts were analyzed for evidence of ideas and practices identified in the literature or by students in their survey responses, these included empathy and willingness to help (Bailey & Card, 2009) as well as projections of themselves as “real” people (Garrison et al, 2000). Lastly, qualitative student evaluation comments from the university course evaluation system were analyzed for additional evidence of instructional practice changes from the phase two action research cycle.

Phase Two Findings

Following thematic analysis of the Zoom meeting transcripts, I have highlighted two responses (Martha and Julie) because they align to ideas presented by the graduate students who responded to the phase one survey. Martha expressed ideas about how this type of meeting “every so often” adds to her course experience and I believe highlights how important the frequent and varied lines of communication can be in an online experience. Similarly, Julie explained that this informal touchpoint shows her that her professor “has her back,” indicating the evidence of investment discussed earlier.

Martha: To be able to just have a meeting every so often just to touch base or to see you know what's going on, or you to explain something to get us involved, it helps me tremendously and I'm not person that really likes to get a lot of help so I'm loving it, I'm loving it, I'm loving it, okay.

Julie: I know that this sounds crazy, but I like being able to put names to faces. I also like to make it more personable because, I feel like it's a journey for all of us, but when I'm actually able to see, like I know my professors face. I'm like, Okay, she really does have my back. I mean it just makes this whole experience a little less just ‘me and my computer’ and a little more personable, which I really do appreciate it.

An additional outcome of this practice was the sense of community fostered between students in these meetings. Evidence of this community is seen in a 13-minute exchange which began when Martha sought help on her own research design. Julie jumped in to support her and share ideas to realign her project and make it more meaningful to her own practice. Both Julie and I used vulnerability (through sharing our own struggles) to connect with Martha and create a community that resulted in a loving and excited exchange of energy as Martha honed in on her own research design. In the transcript exchange below, Julie and I empathize with Martha as we share in the challenges she is having as a new teacher and show support for her budding research ideas.

Me: All right, so maybe this group can help Martha out as well. Martha is interested in studying new teachers, she herself is a new teacher, and classroom management. So, as everybody who's ever been a new teacher knows that first year and the classroom management, it could be a real challenge, it was for me for sure! So I think it's a great topic to study. The question is, are you just studying yourself, which is totally fine to just

study your own practice and your own classroom management and see what's working and make tweaks or do you also want to try to support other teachers in this?

Martha: I honestly want to do myself, not that other teachers aren't important but I need help, you know what I mean, like I need to know what i'm walking into and how to navigate my life...and I don't know if i'm thinking too much, this is just me, I'm like a detail-oriented person, when they walk into (the room), I'm talking about knowing every single thing to do all day. I feel like I'm overwhelming myself.

Julie: No i don't think you are, I just think you have a very high expectations of being a first-year teacher. You have very high expectations for yourself because of what you hear others doing or seeing, like how in the world are you doing that?

Martha: Yes

With a singular focus on Martha, Julie and I also demonstrated Noddings' practice of engrossment, showing her our full attention and support through truly listening, caring, and wanting to help her move closer to her expressed goals. By the end of the clip, we are all overjoyed with the amount of progress we have made in 13 minutes. The transcript below highlights the gratitude we felt for the exchange.

Martha: This makes me so happy, I feel like i'm so happy to do the research now... this will help them for kindergarten, you know, learning routines, learning what to do so when they get to kindergarten they're ready.

Me: Yeah you're gonna really make a difference and that's the point of all of it, to make a difference, right? For you, for them, okay good!

Julie: And it makes me happy too that you care so much but also remember it's your first year...and these are not regular times we're in! So ,yes, I get that but just be nice to yourself because you could have researched anything and you chose to research on yourself to make your practice better in a way that is going to help you for the rest of your life. Yeah so it's super cool, yeah kill it Martha

Martha: I'm going to kill it, I'm going to do well.

Me: Yay, all right, we'll work out the details, I'm so glad that you like feel good about and that this is going to be meaningful for you. That's really the goal.

As the semester continued, I held additional opportunities for connection via Zoom with students. Following the close of the semester, I analyzed anonymous student comments on the course evaluation tool used by the university for additional evidence that may support the instructional practices I implemented within my course. Thirty-three percent of students mentioned instructional practices that indicated a supportive, respectful community that honored the individual nature of the students:

- The course helped me to feel confident as I was completing the work
- Very personal class that developed each student's research interests and goals
- Respectful, accommodating and VERY organized
- Always willing to help
- You made me feel like I could do something that I thought I was unable to do

While there is always more work to be done in this area, this action research cycle likely added to a positive student student experience and potentially impacted the ways students interact with each other, as seen in the supportive interaction between Martha and Julie.

Discussion

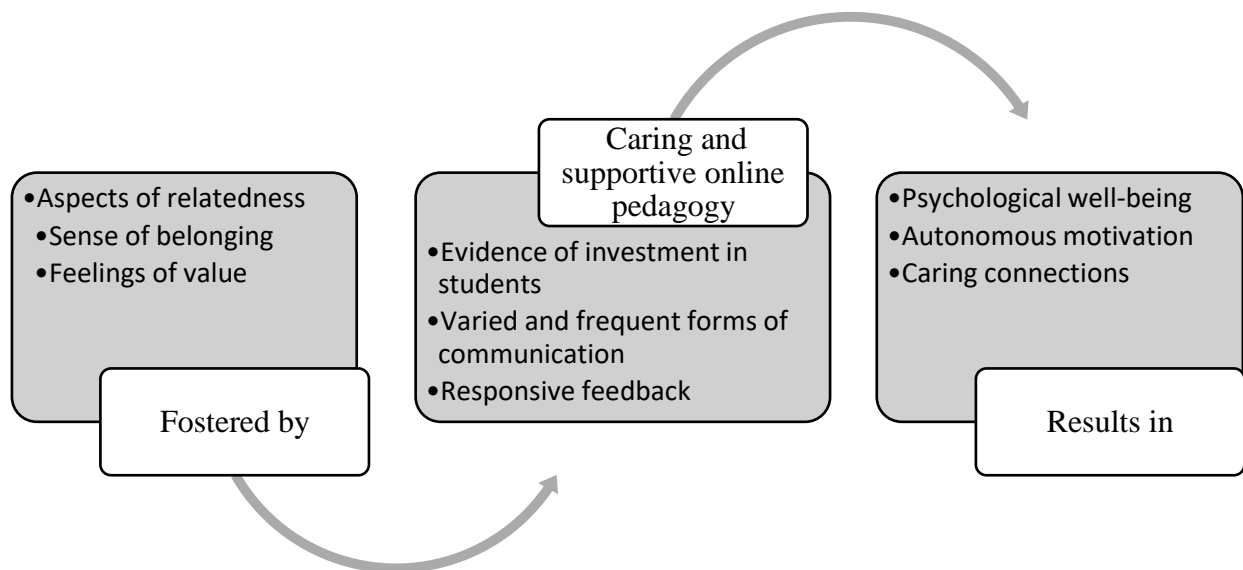
Within my context of online learning, I see the challenges presented by the virtual medium. Without a physical connection or the ability to feel the exchange of loving energy from your teacher, online students can be left isolated, and the pedagogy can easily slip into an execution of tasks as opposed to a pedagogy of care. Why is this significant? What is the impact this has on our students as humans? Freire (1998) reminds us that:

The climate of respect that is born of just, serious, humble, and generous relationships, in which both the authority of the teacher and the freedom of the students are ethically grounded, is what converts pedagogical space into authentic educational experience. (p. 86)

According to self-determination theory, there are three psychological needs that are universally important to psychological well-being and autonomous motivation: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The notion of relatedness, or the need to be connected to and valued by others in a social setting, can be a challenge to create in an online setting yet it may be the key to building an equitable and meaningful learning experience. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) further explain how building relatedness is deeply connected to the relationship between the student and the instructor.

People tend to internalize and accept as their own the values and practices of those to whom they feel, or want to feel, connected, and from contexts in which they experience a sense of belonging. In the classroom, relatedness is deeply associated with a student feeling that the teacher genuinely likes, respects, and values him or her. Students who report such relatedness are more likely to exhibit identified and integrated regulation for the arduous tasks involved in learning, whereas those who feel disconnected or rejected by teachers are more likely to move away from internalization and thus respond only to external contingencies and controls. (p. 139-140)

Figure two highlights the connection between aspects of relatedness (sense of belonging, feelings of value) and the investigated pedagogical practices (evidence of investment in students, varied and frequent forms of communication, responsive feedback), which contribute to support the development of psychological well-being, autonomous motivation, and caring connections within the online student experience.

Figure 2*Integration of relatedness and characteristics of caring online pedagogy*

A classroom is an opportunity to teach and learn, but it is not limited to academic content. Repeatedly, research tells us that the relationship between teacher and student is a powerful conduit for learning. Yet, we push the content to the top of our priority list as educators and think about our connection to students as an afterthought. My own core values and mission as an educator ask me to consider “connection first, content second” in my decision-making and the data shared in this paper illustrate that online students are asking for similar consideration. They want to see evidence of investment, opportunities to connect, and loving communication from their instructors. And, yes, this will lead to a better educational experience, but I believe that this is also a roadmap to model a better human experience of connection.

Implications for this study occur at both the individual and the programmatic level. With an understanding that individual course and instructor experiences greatly contribute to a student’s program experience, it is recommended that programs regularly survey their online students to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences across the program and their coursework. Additionally, reflection from individual instructors on their contribution to graduate student experience in a program is essential to create meaningful change (or sustain) the students experience. In this study, online graduate students sought more opportunities to feel connected to and valued within their educational experiences. As online programs at the graduate level continue to grow, we must not lose sight of the impact that connection, or lack thereof, can have on our students and, as a result, their learning within a program.

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