Foregrounding Care in Online Student Engagement in a South African E-learning University

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ABSTRACT

This study reports how ethics of care principles were foregrounded in a first-year English module offered at an open distance e-learning (ODeL) university in South Africa to enhance online student engagement. Current research indicates that online student engagement predicts student success; however, there is a paucity of how ethics of care principles can be foregrounded in online student interaction to enhance student participation. The researcher used an action research approach to explore the students' and lecturers' interactions in this module. Their interactions on the discussion forum over four semesters were carefully analysed to establish whether ethics of care principles were displayed. Interviews were also conducted with the lecturers concerned to determine their views on care ethics. Data was also collected through pre- and post-student evaluations of the module, and evaluations of the virtual class conducted during the semester. The key findings indicated that the students understood care as collaboration and respect in online interactions. Despite the lecturers displaying little or no awareness of the principles, their comments resonated with some care principles. Future research should focus on how the ethics of care principles can be integrated into online interaction while teaching an online English module.

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INTRODUCTION

In response to the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, the issues of care ethics in online learning shot into the spotlight. Research indicates that caring relationships with staff are often important to students' wellbeing and success at university (Tett, Cree, Mullins, & Christie 2017). Additionally, Spitzman and Balconi (2019) view teaching and learning as accounting for the power imbalances inherent in communication, with the multifaceted identities of individuals being critical to all students being able to learn, both from the curriculum and from one another. This view confirms that online learning allows students to learn from one another through engagement. The challenge is that a limited amount of research is available regarding the students' experiences of care in the online learning post-COVID-19 pandemic surroundings while studying an English module in an ODeL environment. The sudden switch from blended learning to a fully online teaching, learning, and assessment mode adversely affected academics and students during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced worldwide in the early 2020s. At the ODeL university where the current study was conducted, planned and well-placed student support endeavours existed before the pandemic, constituting an element of care for the students involved. Of particular importance was stopping the posting of learning materials to the students involved, accompanied by moving all forms of teaching, learning, and assessment to a fully online medium (Shange, 2022). During this time, I observed that online student engagement remained a concern in the English module where this research was conducted. Considering the traumatic situation that students and lecturers faced, poor online student engagement made it difficult for lecturers to enact care when interacting with the students of this module. Additionally, Henriksen et al. (2022) contend that "most of the research undertaken into the pedagogy of care has occurred in traditional face-to-face settings"(p. 76), therefore prompting researchers like Rose and Adams (2014) to call for additional research to be pursued on how online instructors experience and exercise care. The present study sought to fill the gap on how care can be foregrounded as a measure for addressing issues of students' experiences of care in online student engagement within the English module under study.

LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theory overarching this study is that of relational care, as espoused by Noddings (1992). The researcher (Noddings, 1992) discusses four components of 'caring' within an educational situation. The first component, modelling, recognises that the educator can demonstrate, through their behaviour, the meaning of "caring in action" (1992, 228). In Noddings' (1992) view, the form of pedagogical care involved refers to those situations where the educator is invested in the holistic growth of their students and where they attempt to elevate the level of student understanding above that of merely 'knowing about' the various domains of learning, to one of genuinely caring about their education, as an integral element of their growth. Noddings writes, "We do not tell our students to care; we show them how to care by creating caring relations with them" (1992, p. 228). She further believes that establishing such caring relations forms the bedrock of all framework dimensions (Noddings, 1992). The present research focused on whether the lecturers concerned knew how to create caring connections to enhance online student engagement.

The second component, dialogue, Noddings (1992) presents as a situation where the educator intentionally engages the students in open-ended and genuine dialogue centred on caring. In Noddings' view, such dialogue, which does not have predetermined outcomes, is a genuine "search for understanding, empathy or appreciation, playful, serious, logical or imaginative, goal or process-oriented, and always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning" (1992, p. 228). Furthermore, Noddings (1992) espouses that such dialogue allows educators to model caring in action. The dialogue should involve opportunities to discuss caring explicitly with the individual's learning and fostering learning appreciation within the broader context of their lives and interests. In the case of maintaining dialogue with the students involved, exposing the students intentionally to caring practices, which is critical, consists of discussing the implications of caring during teaching engagements and foregrounding the idea through various platforms, like discussion forums and virtual classes, as well as during the students' engagement with e-tutors and external markers.

The situation of care regarding the English module studied in the present research is such that various stakeholders are expected to play their role in enacting care for the cared-for students in the current case. Lecturers are expected to teach with care, while students are meant to learn in a caring environment, with e-tutors providing online support in a caring manner and external markers assessing assignments with care, as they give feedback to the students when they assess their work. Such practices augur well for cultivating care in online student engagement, considering that most of the students involved come from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds. Bozkurt et al. (2020, p. 42) confirm the above, stating that South Africa is noted as being one of the most unequal societies in the world.

According to Noddings (2010a), the third component, practice, involves "parents and teachers providing opportunities for children and students to practice caring"(p. 147). Burke and Lamar (2021, p. 612) further concede that a central tenet of the teacher's engagement with this component is the need to provide timely feedback, to recognise and affirm a demonstrated caring response from the individual learner, or to highlight, supportively, any responses that do not serve to promote caring within the learning environment. In the same vein, Noddings (2010a) emphasises that the component of "practice" does not involve the teacher rewarding an individual's act of caring (p. 148). Instead, it acknowledges the act, cultivating an intrinsically motivated caring response that might transform the individual's ethical framework. Such a situation might be interpreted as caring tapping into the affective domain that plays a role when students learn a language. Researchers in second language learning, like Youssef (2012) and Tae-Young (2006), opine that learners' positive attitude towards language learning will likely result in increased input and improved interaction in a second language. Such students might have a good chance of participating meaningfully in the learning process and, thus, stand an enhanced opportunity to embrace the caring enacted by the lecturers.

The final component, confirmation, "points a person to a better self" (Noddings 2010a, p. 148). Furthermore, Burke and Lamar (2021, p. 605) opine that confirmation can be fostered by the teacher finding an opportunity to provide specific feedback about the individual's caring responses, including the effects of such responses on others. In so doing, they further note that notions of pedagogical inspiration that focus on generating inner motivation within each student encourage them to continue their ongoing relationship with the focus of their learning (Burke & Lamar, 2021, p. 605). As highlighted earlier, Noddings (2010a) stresses that confirmation can only occur within the context of a caring relationship consciously cultivated between the teacher and the student. In her view, such a context focuses on the content being taught and considers the general well-being of the carers and the cared-for involved. Henriksen et al. (2022, p. 76) explain that, in education, the presumption of care for students exceeds merely providing content and designing learning activities. In their view, such care acknowledges each student's existence as a human being with needs and aspirations, which necessitates a closer look than before at the connection between care and online student engagement.

PEDAGOGY OF CARE IN ONLINE LEARNING

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning was considered the best option for continuing the academic project amid the lockdowns and isolation resulting from the unexpected global health crisis. In such a situation, very little, or only haphazard planning could be done to minimise the disruption caused by the pandemic. However, "the good intentions exposed deeply rooted pre-existing inequalities" (Bozkurt et al., 2020, p. 6). In some instances, there were negative reactions to online learning, which was seen as a means of reinforcing existing privileges (Mokhoali, 2020, as cited in Bozkurt et al., 2020, p. 6). Similarly, Burke and Larmar (2021) assert that online learning might negatively impact a student's sense of connection, leading to experiences of isolation and disempowerment for those involved. Additionally, the related research has highlighted that online students are less likely to experience a sense of identity and personal engagement with their learning, peers, and instructor under such conditions (Rose, 2017). As a possible solution to the prevailing challenge, it was worthwhile considering the research by Noddings (1992, 1998, 2005, 2010a), which focuses extensively on care in pedagogical relationships, thus stimulating a significant interest in the role of care in classrooms.

THE NATURE OF UNISA'S ONLINE PEDAGOGY OF CARE

Unisa's vision is captured in the following words: 'Towards *the* African university shaping futures in the service of humanity'. The 11 c's plus one further strengthens the motto, including courage, communication, and care. At Unisa, care is explained as creating an environment within which members of the Unisa community feel understood, respected, and accepted. Since the current article focuses on care ethics and enhancing the spirit of social justice in online student engagement, it was considered essential to unpack how care can be enacted to enhance the student experience. The research was undertaken against the backdrop of the study by Burke and Larmar (2021), demonstrating how an online care pedagogy deepens student engagement. In addition, the two researchers argue that intentional engagement in care-focused teaching for online students is paramount.

Some researchers view care as being central to teaching and learning. Due to all the challenges that online learning presents to students, the fact that care is viewed as such is almost inevitable. In terms of the research conducted by Burke and Larmar (2021, p. 603), Noddings› (1992, 1998, 2005, 2010b) seminal work on the centrality of care in effective teaching and learning is seen as being based upon the position that care is fundamental to human relationships; that all people desire to be cared for, and that care is an educational goal and vital element of the educational process. The notion that "a good teacher is a caring teacher is widely held across various educational settings" (Burke & Larmar, 2021, p. 603). Some researchers have provided evidence highlighting the significant impact of care (and kindness) on student learning and success. For instance, Busteed (2015, p. 4) explored the graduates' experiences in college that are strongly linked to long-term outcomes like a great job and a great life. This highlights the positive impact of pedagogical care on learning and "on the student›s life beyond their studies" (Burke & Larmar, 2021, p. 603). Busteed's findings emphasise the importance of providing emotional support during a student›s studies and the need for an educator to care for their students (2015, p.4). In summary, he concludes that student learning success is most significantly related to emotional attachment throughout the learning process.

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

The current study took the form of action research that explored how Noddings' ethics of care principles were foregrounded to enhance online student engagement through the learning management system (LMS) adopted in a first-year English Proficiency for University Studies module offered at an ODeL university in South Africa. In the view of Burns (2005, as cited in Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 112), the primary intention of action research is to find out more about what is going on in one's local context than was previously known, and to be able to change or to improve current practice within the prevailing situation. The researcher in question further opines that action research creates meaning and understanding in problematic social situations and enhances the quality of human interactions and practices within such situations (Burns, 2005, as cited in Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 56). Action research was considered appropriate for the present study, as using such a form of research helped the researcher understand the problematic situation of online student engagement to address the poor interaction in an ODeL language teaching classroom during the pandemic. Wallace (1998) suggests the following possible areas as a focus for action in terms of language teaching:

1. classroom management,
2. appropriate materials,
3. particular teaching areas (e.g. reading and oral skills),
4. student behaviour, achievement, or motivation.
5. personal management issues (e.g. time management, or relationships with colleagues/ higher management). (p. 19).

The concern of the present study was student behaviour with online engagement. Of particular importance was examining whether care was cultivated during such interactions. Interest was shown in whether Noddings' care ethics' principles were cultivated and whether there were instances of reciprocity, dialogue, practice, modelling, and confirmation during the online

interactions. This was aimed at changing the students' behaviour regarding their participation in online interaction through an intervention grounded on care ethics.

The present study focused on the following questions:

RQ1: What are the students' experiences and views of care in online learning?
RQ2: How is care demonstrated in the English Proficiency module through the LMS post-COVID-19 pandemic?
RQ3: What is the response of the English Proficiency students to care initiatives in the module?

The university under study is a mega ODeL institution in South Africa, with over 300,000 students. According to the university's website, it has eight prestigious colleges offering a wide range of high-quality academic and vocational programmes and over 1,400 academics. In addition, there is a Graduate School of Business Leadership(SBL). The colleges are the College of Accounting Sciences; the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences; the College of Economic and Management Sciences; the College of Education; the College of Graduate Studies; the College of Human Sciences; the College of Law; and the College of Science, Engineering, and Technology. The English Proficiency module was, at the time of the present study, offered at the first-year level, with an enrolment of about 1,300 students registered for different study disciplines, like Statistics and Mathematics, Social Work, Health Studies, and a few others. The module, currently positioned at NQF level 5, carries 12 credits, with the teaching team consisting of four academics and two administrative officers. Teaching and learning activities are conducted through the myUnisa platform, supported by Moodle, effective January 2022. The change also added to the burden of migrating all modules to a fully online mode, which meant that the students involved had to contend with the new mode of delivery, plus the novel Moodle platform. Such sudden changes prompted the present researcher's curiosity to determine the care provided to the students under these stressful conditions.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection and analysis were conducted according to the three action research cycles, commensurate with many different action research models that present this type of research as either "spiral or cyclical" (Kember, 2000, p. 19). The research used a model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) of four essential movements, "evolving through a reiterative and self-reflective spiral or loop, and repeated according to the research's scope, purposes, and outcomes"(p.59). The researcher's concern and interest were directed towards changing the situation regarding student engagement from a caring perspective. The goal was cultivating a climate of care regarding student engagement to enhance interaction in the online English teaching classroom. Therefore, the researcher being an insider in the research allowed for action research to occur. Stringer (2007) supports such a view that "the role of the researcher, rather than being that of an expert who does research, is that of a resource person"(p. 24). To address the three research questions on the student's experiences and views of care in online student engagement, data was collected and analysed qualitatively as demonstrated in Table 1 below.

All the data was analysed through the qualitative content analysis method to identify common themes and patterns that emanated from the participants' comments. In the view of Patton (2002), this involves "identifying, coding, categorising, classifying, and labelling primary patterns in data" (p.120). As soon as some of the same themes recurred from the data shared by the participants, that indicated a point of data saturation. After careful extraction of the data, only qualitative quotes relevant to the research questions were selected. To address validity and reliability, different sources of data were used to ensure that the themes that emerged were an accurate reflection of the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process of coding and identifying themes and patterns was done in a systematic manner for the trustworthiness of the study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

RESEARCH GROUP

Before the research was conducted, ethical clearance was sought from the College Research Ethics Committee. The study is linked to an engaged scholarship project registered with this

CYCLES	1 MARCH 2021 TO OCTOBER 2021	2 JULY 2022 TO JANUARY 2023	3 FEBRUARY 2023 TO APRIL 2023
STAGE 1	**Data gathering** – Meet-and-greet discussion forum posted – Data analysed to plan for the next stage	**Data gathering** – Meet-and-greet discussion forum posted with 'care' foregrounded – Data analysed to plan for the next stage	**Data gathering** – Welcome message on the LMS had 'care' foregrounded – Data analysed to plan for the next stage
STAGE 2	**Planning for data collection** – Compile post-evaluation questions emanating from meet-and-greet discussion forum	**Planning for data collection** – Introduced 'caring' through my responses to the students – Compiled interview questions for lecturers – Students invited to evaluate the module	**Planning for data collection** – Started a meet-and greet forum – Integrated a discussion forum into Assessment 01 on student expectations – Conducted a virtual class where Noddings 'care' principles were shared with students and lecturers
STAGE 3	**Data collection** – Data collected from students' responses to post-evaluation questions	**Data collection** – Data collected from the students' discussion forum – Conducted interviews with lecturers – Student module evaluations	**Data collection** – Data collected from the students' discussion forum – Data from students' expectations of the module (pre-evaluations) – Evaluations of the virtual class
STAGE 4	**Organising and managing data** – Open coding – Emerging themes and categories identified from the students' responses	**Organising and managing data** – Open coding – Emerging themes and categories identified from the students' responses and lecturer responses to interview questions	**Organising and managing data** – Open coding – Emerging themes and categories identified from the students' comments in the discussion forum, expectations from the module, and evaluation of the virtual class

Table 1 Summary of action research cycles.

university's College of Human Sciences (Reg 90049675_CREC_CHS_2022). The researcher explained the purpose of the research to the participants before they completed the consent form. Ten student posts on the discussion forum were purposefully selected from each of the three action research cycles. In total, 30 student posts were carefully studied to determine how they interacted with the lecturers and other students. Five students in each action research cycle (a total of 15 students) responded to the pre-evaluation questions posted on the discussion forum at the beginning of the semester. This was to determine the students' feelings and ideas about online student engagement at the point of entry in the module. Another 15 students also responded to the post-evaluation questions posted on the discussion forum, showing their understanding of how they had experienced the interaction on the forum. Four lecturers participated in the semi-structured interviews conducted during the second action research cycle. Both students and lecturers were purposively selected because I believed that they had the best knowledge about the research topic. (Their profiles appear as Appendices B and C). The aim was to establish how they enacted care during their online interaction with the students of this module. The following Table 2 shows the study participants.

Table 2 Table of participants.

PARTICIPANTS	NUMBER	DATA COLLECTION
Students	5	Pre-evaluation
	5	Post-evaluation
	5	Virtual class student evaluation
	30	Discussion forum
Lecturers	4	Semi-structured interviews

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Due to the nature of the present research, which consisted of three action research cycles, the initial data for the first cycle was gathered through a 'meet-and-greet' thread posted on the discussion forum for the students to participate in. The thread was followed by post-evaluation questions from the 'meet-and-greet' data. In the next cycle, another 'meet-and-greet' forum was posted on the discussion forum, with the concept of *care* being foregrounded. The postings in the forum were based on new information that emerged from the analysis of cycle one. The semi-structured interviews were distributed to four lecturers who taught the module during the semester concerned. The students were also invited to evaluate the module before they wrote their examinations. In the third cycle, the researcher posted a welcome page on the LMS, intentionally foregrounding the issue of *care*. Such a move was motivated by the information that emerged from the cycle's two analyses. In the third and final cycle, a 'meet-and-greet' thread was posted on the discussion forum, but this time the thread was integrated into Assessment 01. A virtual orientation was conducted, in which Noddings' (2010a) four principles of care were presented to the students, the module lecturers, and the administration officers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results will be presented according to the data collected from the three research cycles. I anticipated that this could be messy since data was collected and analysed in each cycle to influence planning for the subsequent stage. The first cycle (lasting from March 2021 to October 2021) consisted of what Stringer (2007, p. 30) refers to as the "look stage", involving gathering data from the 'meet- and-greet' thread, which had been posted on the discussion forum. The purpose of the cycle concerned was to build a picture of online student engagement in this module. When the students joined the module, the researcher created a 'meet-and-greet' thread, posted after the usual welcome message on the discussion forum. The 'meet-and-greet' forum was phrased as follows:

> Lecturer: *Hello. My name is … , your Primary Lecturer for ENG… Please chat with us about your expectations of the Module and how we can walk this journey together. We look forward to hearing from you. Regards. Dr …*

The students provided an overwhelming 150 posts in response to the invitation, some of which caught the current researcher's attention, as they were in line with certain of the care principles espoused by Noddings (2010a). An example of such follows:

> Student A: *My name is … . I am currently based in Pretoria and looking forward in having to interact, learn and share this semester with you all, in a very fun educational way. My expectations from this Module is to see my academic writing skills improve in a tertiary manner, to learn how to construct sentences effectively, and to speak good English.*

Lecturer: *Welcome … Indeed we will learn together in a fun way. Let us interact as we learn.*

Data from student post-evaluations

In addition to the 'meet-and-greet' data, the students also responded to post-evaluation questions e-mailed to them.

When you first joined the Module ENG1511, did you feel welcomed by your lecturers and other students? Give examples.

When the students were asked whether they felt welcome in the module when they first enrolled, the responses were notable. One student (Sf2) had the following to say about the matter:

> *Yes I felt welcomed yah I did the time I had a session on teams but am not sure who was responsible for the session. It was helpful and fun.*

Another male student (Sm1) also commented on this question: *Yes, I felt very welcomed*.

Did you feel any element of care from your module lecturers during the semester?

I received warming announcements and updates and the ENG1511 team eased me into the Module. I felt the team is very caring towards their students. (Sm5)

How else can the module team make you feel welcome?

As someone who in general struggles with engaging in these conditions I am not quite sure. Perhaps implementing more regular scheduled opportunities for communication throughout the semester through virtual meetings or through the discussion forum. (Sf4)

What do you consider as strengths and weaknesses of the Module?

(Sf4) commented as follows about the strengths and weaknesses of the module:

Strengths – Content was easy to engage with and instructions were all very clear regarding expectations for assignments and examination. Weaknesses – mostly problems related to the Moodle platform such as marks not being available and not receiving email notifications for announcements like we did before.

Do you have any suggestions for the future of this module?

(Sm2) focused on assessment in his response to this question: "*I suggest that teaching students straight what is gonna be in the exam will be helpful.*" Similarly, (Sf3) also seemed to be worried about the issue of assessment, stating: "*They mustn't have too much difficult questions on comprehension.*"

The second cycle took place from July 2022 to January 2023. Based on the new information that emerged from the analysis of cycle one, the researcher intentionally foregrounded the issue of care in her responses to the students in the 'meet-and-greet'. She also provided guidelines on what information the students needed to provide when they introduced themselves.

Lecturer: *Hello. My name is … and I am one of your lecturers for ENG1511. It is a pleasure to meet all of you in this forum. Please introduce yourself by answering the four questions:*

1. Your name and surname 2. Where you are based 3. A short message for your fellow peers in this group 4. Your expectations from this Module. I look forward to hearing from all of you. Regards …

A student responded to the above as follows:

Student: *Hi everyone! I am pleased to meet you students and lectures. My name is …, am from Soweto, this is my first time studying this Module and I can't wait to acquire more knowledge as it will be a good experience.*

Lecturer: *Greetings to you too … . You are welcome.*

In the subsequent response to a student's post, the lecturer deliberately mentioned the notion of 'care' to introduce the concept to the students. Another student posted as follows:

Hi guys! My name is … from Gauteng Alexandra. I am looking forward for this journey and I hope we all do well in this Module…

Lecturer: *Hello … . Welcome to this Module where we care for you. All the best!*

Data from lecturers' interviews

The lecturers' interviews were intended to establish whether the lecturers understood the principles of care and whether they had enacted any form of care while teaching the English module concerned online. The first question asked was whether they regarded 'caring' to be an important aspect of online interaction with the students. (Lf1) responded positively to the question, stating:

Yes. I regard caring as an important aspect of online interaction, as it is critical to student academic success. Caring gives the student a sense of belonging, which fosters ownership of the learning process by the students.

In a similar vein, (Lm1) shared a similar sentiment in answering:

> Yes. Caring is important, because online systems are susceptible to many glitches, and these require one to understand that the students' participation can be affected in multiple ways by these realities. Thus, one needs to be patient and always [to] *take into consideration the needs of the students.*

The second question asked of the lecturers was intended to establish whether they had changed their teaching style during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Lf1) spoke of the following:

> Yes. I had to move out of my comfort zone, and find new ways to communicate effectively with students, ensuring that my message is always conveyed effectively and efficiently. This required some creativity; printed learning material had to be summarised and reworked to suit the new platform. The platform also had to completely switch to remote e-learning, as we relied on technology for learning.

On the contrary,(Lm1) had this to say:

> The teaching style did not change. What only changed is that there were more teaching platforms through which we could teach [the] *students. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we could teach students on MS Teams, whereas previously we did not have such a platform.*

The lecturers were, further asked to share what kind of support they thought would be expected by the students from the module lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, (Lf3) responded with confidence, saying:

> I have no idea, unless a survey is carried out to find out what students need to excel in their studies. Moreover, I cannot state with finality, because, currently, a new LMS is being utilised in the university, and I haven't been in the Module since the introduction of Moodle in ENG1511.

(Lm1), on the other hand, had different expectations regarding support for the students, which he commented on in the following words:

> The Covid pandemic resulted in the university increasing the use of online platforms in order to increase contact with the students. The university has to ensure that there are no glitches in these systems, and that the students are sufficiently trained to navigate these online platforms. For example, students always complain that the invigilator app that is used to monitor online exams often malfunctions. Adequate support is necessary to ensure that the students are not prejudiced by all these online systems.

The lecturers were then asked whether they had any idea of Noddings' principles of care, to which 100% answered negatively. As a follow-up, they were asked whether they regarded 'caring' as an important aspect of online student interaction. (Lf3) responded with enthusiasm, commenting as follows:

> Caring is important, because, as a lecturer, we need to be sympathetic, and [to] *have empathy towards our students, as they may be facing challenges in their lives that could/ may affect their studies. So, I feel [that] care is very important to practise as a teacher.*

(Lf2) also shared a similar sentiment, with her commenting as follows:

> Yes, I do. I believe that working with people, especially students, requires one to be caring. Lecturers must acknowledge that they deal with human beings who require support and, sometimes, a caring heart, when they struggle with their studies or even [with their] *personal experiences.*

Having heard what thoughts lecturers had regarding caring, they were then asked how they thought lecturers could enact 'care' in their interactions with the students they sometimes had to teach during emergencies. (Lf2) made the following noteworthy response concerning the above:

Lecturers can isolate cases that require special attention, due to their circumstances. For example, pregnant students might go into early labour before submitting their assignments or exams, lose a loved one, have cases of GBV [i.e. gender-based violence]*, etc. When there is evidence of some of the examples provided, lecturers can find ways of extending submission dates (through assignment or examination departments) or preparing a special task for such students.*

(Lm1) expressed similar thoughts on the same issue in the following way:

Lecturers should be accommodating; they should be able to listen [to] *and understand the problems and emergencies that the students encounter. For instance, if* [the] *students require extensions on their assignments, because they* [have] *had* [to cope with] *emergencies, these should be granted. However, the extent to which the lecturers can demonstrate care is limited, because there are other role-players beyond the lecturers, who also affect how lecturers enact care.*

The data from cycle two was then used to plan for cycle 3, which took place from February to April 2023. As usual, the welcome message on the LMS was updated, with the term 'care' being clearly included as part of the formal welcome posted on the module. The posting read: *"Welcome to this module where **we care for** one another."* The introduction was followed by the less formal 'meet-and-greet' discussion thread, which resembled the one used in the previous semester. However, what was different on this occasion was that the discussion forum was linked to the first assessment. The students were asked to participate in at least two forums and to attach the screenshots (on which their names appeared) to their written assessment. (See Appendix A for assessment instructions.)

Overwhelming responses were received regarding the topic, clearly due to the assurance that marks would be awarded for this part of the question and the fact that the issues raised ran across all three cycles, which took place during different semesters. The following comment is an excellent example of what the students regarded as important in this module:

My full expectation for this Module is to gain more knowledge about a lot of things, improve my formal language so that I can eliminate my informal language, and have access to English Communications. So I am looking forward to working with all students and lecturers in a good way for all of us to succeed.

Another student included *"engaging with other students and working with them well"*. The same student expressed strong feelings against being disrespected while engaging with others online, urging the need for *"no undermining other students' ideas"*. The students also shared what they expected from the lecturers. One student articulated his expectations as follows: *"From the ENG1511 team, I expect open communication and assistance. From my fellow students, I expect us to respectful in all aspects."*

Surprisingly, one student mentioned the requirement of reciprocity in her expectations, which is one of the caring principles: *In terms of my educators, I expect them to give it their all and in return I will gladly reciprocate by giving my all with my academic performance.*

In addition to the data collected from the discussion forum, the ENG1511 team conducted a virtual orientation for onboarding for the new semester intake. The module leader intentionally shared Noddings' principles of care at this stage. When asked to post their evaluation of the virtual session in the chat group, the students' comments posted displayed a sense of satisfaction and appreciation. This interaction occurred during the virtual orientation. One student posted: *"This was a very informative session, thank you ENG1511 team"*, while another expressed similar sentiments about the engagement that had occurred during the virtual orientation: *"This was very informative and gave me direction on the Module. Thank you team."* For research trustworthiness the action research approach allowed me to practice ongoing self-reflection and self-scrutiny to ensure that I had interpreted the data correctly.

DISCUSSION

In this section, data that was obtained through the use of the qualitative methods used in the three action research cycles will be discussed. The discussion of the findings will be presented

from the perspective of all three cycles combined to examine how Noddings' ethics of care principles were foregrounded in a first-year English Proficiency for University Studies module offered at an ODeL university in South Africa to enhance online student engagement. The data obtained was analysed during each action research cycle, as what transpired during each cycle influenced the planning for the next cycle. Content analysis was employed to identify the themes and patterns in the data the participants shared. The key themes – collaboration and motivation to learn the English language online, caring and a sense of belonging, technical challenges, respect and reciprocity – from all three cycles were extracted and will be presented simultaneously.

Collaboration and motivation to learn the English language online

The students' comments from all three cycles emphasised working together and helping one another with their learning. Such cooperation is confirmed by the student who commented: "*This is my first time doing online studies, as well as studying after many years. I am looking forward to working with you all, and all the best.*" A comment like this confirms what some researchers on care ethics emphasise: that "care is relational and that human beings are fundamentally relational and interdependent" (Engster & Hamington, 2015, p. 3). Certainty exists that a collaborative learning experience benefits students, as it "provides an opportunity for them to learn from other learners with varying proficiency levels" (Robinson et al., 2021, p. 29). However, the current research on online collaborative learning seems lacking because this teaching method was primarily used in face-to-face encounters with students. In Johnson's (2013) view, teaching and learning in an online environment allows the participants to apply new technologies, collaborate with others, and take advantage of flexible schedules.

Caring and a sense of belonging

The comments of both the students and the lecturers indicated the importance of caring and inculcating a sense of belonging in online learning. Such observations were clearly articulated in the following excerpt:

> *Having been exposed to other modules, module leaders are, at times, lacking in input, communication and presence. With ENG1511, clear communication and presence are an absolute joy to have. The sufficient and useful announcements, resources, guidance – and not feeling alone in a module group site – make a monumental difference to the learning experience and quality thereof. It also is our only language/writing module; it is a welcome and enriching extension to our scientific education, where numbers and mathematics tend to take precedence above literature and arts.*

The problem experienced with isolation and loneliness in online learning is well documented in the relevant research. Researchers have highlighted various reasons for such isolation and loneliness, which tend to affect the students and the lecturers who experienced such emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, some academic staff members might have felt "apprehensive and inadequately equipped to teach wholly (or mostly) online", particularly as they might still have been learning to use some of the platforms involved (Gillett-Swan, 2017, p. 20). This situation was aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns when the students grappled with a lack of interpersonal contact and community with their peers and teachers (Poole & Zhang, 2021). A lecturer (Lf3) interviewed expressed a similar concern when she saw the need to change her teaching style during the COVID-19 pandemic, as "*the students were now isolated from the library resources and their peers*". In other words, the isolation also extended to additional learning resources since the students could not access the library during lockdown.

Technical challenges

On the theme of technical challenges, the lecturers expressed concern about the challenges of technology, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Lm1) 's comment was as follows:

> *The university has to ensure that there are no glitches in these systems, and that the students are sufficiently trained to navigate these online platforms. For example, students always complain that the invigilator app, that is used to monitor online*

exams, often malfunctions. Adequate support is necessary to ensure that the students are not prejudiced by the malfunctioning of all these online systems.

Notwithstanding that Unisa has always provided instruction through distance education, the COVID-19 pandemic immediately forced the university to resort to fully online learning. The available research has lamented the inequalities and the stark digital divide exposed when the marginalised students, mainly in the rural areas, showed evidence of having to battle with internet connectivity, bandwidth, and devices incompatible with the digital tools for accessing learning materials and assessment. Adam (2020, p. 1) opines that students require "digital and internet literacy and the self-directed learning skills"necessary to best benefit from online/ remote learning.

Respect and reciprocity

The main concern for many students was the granting of respect to one another and their lecturers. One student noted: *"I expect my fellow students to be friendly and respect each other and* [to] *have good working relationships with my lecturers, who will give me positive motivation and guidance when* [such is] *needed."* The above corroborates what Schreder et al. (2023, p. 2) concede in terms of actual engagement driving learning involving reciprocal learning relationships with other people in the class. Such aligns with one of Tronto's five care elements: solidarity. In the researcher's view, solidarity involves taking collective responsibility, thinking of citizens as both receivers and givers of care, and seriously considering the nature of caring needs in society (Sykes & Gachago, 2018). In this particular case, the conclusion may be drawn that the students involved become both the receivers and the givers of care, as they tend to the needs of one another.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The data collected from the students and lecturers of the English Proficiency for University Studies Module provide insight into how Noddings' care principles can be foregrounded to enhance online student engagement in the English Module about which the study was conducted. The key themes that emanated from the data, address the research questions as follows: Collaboration and motivation to learn the English language online, RQ 3 (confirmation), caring and a sense of belonging RQ1(practice), Technical challenges, Respect (RQ1), and reciprocity (dialogueRQ2). Even though the students and lecturers concerned initially had no idea about the care principles, it is evident from their comments that there is a place for care pedagogy in online student engagement. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the inequalities and injustices of online education, has compelled academics in higher education to revisit other pedagogies, like the care pedagogy. The recommendation is made that care should be present at the core of the curriculum to enhance online student engagement when teaching English online. A limitation of this study was that not all the students responded to the request to participate because most of the time once they complete the module, they hardly log on to the module site. A more diverse student voice on care experiences in this module would further strengthen future research on care initiatives in online student engagement.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

APPENDIX A: ASSESSMENT ONE

As part of your Assessment one, you have been given the following instruction: Participate in any two topics created by your lecturers, e-tutors, and fellow students on the ENG1511 discussion forum platform on myUnisa. To serve as evidence of your participation, take a screenshot/picture and attach it to your assignment. Your screenshot/picture should display your surname and initials.

TOPIC

Share with us what your expectations are from this module. In your comments, tell us what you expect from the ENG1511 team as well as from your fellow students.

LABEL	GENDER	AGE RANGE (IN YEARS)	HIGHEST QUALIFICATION
Lm1	Male	40–50	Doctorate
Lf1	Female	40–50	Doctorate
Lf2	Female	30–39	Masters degree
Lf3	Female	30–39	Honours degree

LABEL	GENDER	AGE RANGE (IN YEARS)
Sm1	Male	>30
Sm2	Male	20–29
Sf1	Female	20–29
Sf2	Female	20–29
Sf3	Female	20–29

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical approval was obtained for the work described in this article.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Thembeka Shange: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, visualization, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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