Care Matters in Higher Education

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the centrality of care in a profound way, in society in general and in our universities (Lynch, 2022; Tronto & Fine, 2022). Now that we have returned to 'normal' in our colleges, how can academics keep care at the centre of what we do and who we are? This is especially pertinent to reflect on as institutes of technology (IoTs) transition into new technological universities (TUs).

The role of IoTs in enabling access to higher education for non-traditional students has been well documented (Collins et al., 2020). In general, higher proportions of students from under-represented groups progress to IoTs than to universities (HEA, 2018). As the new TUs grapple with pursuing a stronger research agenda, academics' high teaching loads will be 'difficult to sustain in the context of a significant re-alignment of the sector towards research' (Collins et al., 2020, p. 39). TU lecturers teach 16–18 hours of classes per week.

There is a significant threat to care as the new TUs are expected to deliver on a research agenda while also teaching students who may need extra support to navigate their third-level journey. We are standing at a turning point for our institutions – will care be part of our new technological universities?

Research on care at third level

Care is usually not positioned as fundamental to how we teach at third level, and it has received little attention in higher-education pedagogy (Anderson et al., 2019). The relational is not seen as central to our role as lecturers (Lynch, 2010; O'Brien, 2014). By the time students reach us in the university, we have adopted a very care-less view of their educational needs.

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Care is usually not positioned as fundamental to how we teach at third level, but research shows that it is central to good teaching and learning, especially for students who need more support. This article looks at why care matters and how academics can keep care at the centre of what we do, creating a climate of care in our new technological universities.

Kathleen Lynch (2010) contends that this culture of carelessness is, in effect, a hidden doxa in higher education. But as recent research has highlighted, care has a key role in higher education, in good teaching and learning (National Forum, 2019), in postgraduate research supervision (Hawkins, 2019), and in student experience (Anderson et al., 2019).

Although care in higher education is generally under-researched, the limited literature that focuses on it supports the idea that a relationship-rich pedagogy is critical for student learning (Walker & Gleaves, 2016, p.66). Care is the 'bedrock of all successful education' (Noddings, 1992, p.27), and students will 'listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter' (ibid., p.35).

Recent research from New Zealand confirms this, echoing Noddings: students said they cared more about learning in courses where teachers seemed to care about them (Anderson et al., 2019). They conceptualised good teachers as those who cared about them, their teaching, and their discipline. Research from the National Forum (2019), drawing on data from over 4,000 higher-education students in Ireland, lists caring as a key component of excellent teaching.

Applying an ethic of care to our interactions with students increases the chance that they will stay the course in university - especially relevant as we consider the rising attrition rates in TUs.

These reports are making care visible. It is crucial that we disseminate this information, to highlight the essential care work of university educators. We need to recentre relationality in our higher-education pedagogies and practice.

A climate of care

The transition to becoming a TU will entail 'a root and branch transformation of the working life of academics', according to Collins et al. (2020, p.10), who also write (somewhat contradictorily) that lecturers in the IOT/TU sector have 'spare capacity'. I would argue that any spare capacity we have can be accounted for in our relational practice, our pedagogies, supervision relationships, formal student mentoring, and informal pastoral care. We mind our students well, particularly those first-generation students who might need extra support. Research confirms that non-traditional students may need more care and support to navigate third-level education (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Motta & Bennett, 2018).

Nel Noddings (2012) suggests that we create 'a climate of care' in our classrooms which must be underneath everything we do as educators. When that climate is 'established and maintained, everything else goes better' (2012, p.777). This also creates an inclusive and accepting classroom. Lecturers might also view ourselves as 'care facilitators' (Mariskind, 2014, p.312), as we help students form caring relations with each other. This form of community-building is a key aspect of creating a climate of care.

Specific practices that encourage a climate of care include taking time to know students' names, having regular check-ins, setting out clear assessments, providing timely feedback, and allowing some discretion with coursework submission dates while also providing 'tough care' or good boundaries.

Care and rigour are not dichotomous. We can maintain standards while also allowing space for students who may need extra time or support with assessments and their learning journey. Applying an ethic of care to our interactions with students increases the chance that they will stay the course in university. This is especially relevant as we consider the rising attrition rates in TUs, which increased from 9% to 12% in some programmes between 2020 and 2021 (HEA, 2023).

Care at the centre

Michael D. Higgins, the president of Ireland, during a speech in 2021 said we are now at 'a perilous juncture in the long history of the academy'. He called on universities to 'reclaim and re-energise academia for the pursuit of real knowledge […] and the enrichment of society'. The role of the academic, he argued, is to actively disturb the status quo and to critique the dominating ethos of its institutions.

I feel it is also our role to be more explicit about care, and to adopt a more critical stance towards care. Positioning care as central to our work in technological universities would privilege care in the same way that Cartesian rationality has historically been privileged in academia. We need to become care ambassadors in our universities. If academics do not speak up for care, who will?

In Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022, Jim Miley cautions us to avoid the 'tyranny of uniformity' as our IoTs transition to TUs (Miley, 2022). He argues that we must not lose the uniqueness and diversity of each part of the higher-education system. There is an opportunity to imagine our TUs as caring places where our students can flourish. We need to recentre what Lynch (2022, p.3) calls a 'care-centric narrative' in our institutions. Care matters in higher education.

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Winner of the Irish Research Council Early Career Researcher of the Year award: Professor Aisling McMahon of Maynooth University (centre), flanked by highly commended researchers Dr Natalie McEvoy, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences (left), and Dr Amanda Drury of Dublin City University (right).