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Who Cares? Exploring Student Perspectives on Care Ethics

Cover Page Footnote

Kelly A. Concannon Mannise is Assistant Professor of Writing Nova Southeastern University. She completed doctoral studies at Syracuse University.

Who Cares? Exploring Student Perspectives on Care Ethics

Kelly A. Concannon Mannise

Recent interest in global citizenship and civic responsibility illustrates a commitment to learning in ways that extend beyond the classroom (see Mayhew and Fernandez; Miller, et al.). Service learning is no stranger to this milieu. According to the National Service-learning Clearinghouse, “Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (“What Is Service Learning?”). Service-learning brings together “academic” expertise and experiential learning to create new ways of viewing the world (Mitchell; Moely, et al.; Rosenberger). Further, these opportunities afford students with the ability to engage in *real* rhetorical situations with *real* people (Deans; Rhoads). Implicit are assumptions about the potentials of these situations to create conditions of and for connection and engagement; these rhetorical situations position students and teachers to *care*.

The complex role of care in service learning sites has to this point been highly invisible—with the exception of personal narratives revealing success. In these narratives, pedagogues discuss their ability to create effective assignments and readings that solidify students’ engagement with others, and those who conduct service are lauded for their ability to “care” (Keller, Nelson, and Wick; Bay). However, these practices potentially reify rather than alter relationships of power and privilege (Densmore; Himley).

In this essay, I explore how care—as an ethic, practice, and value—is represented through students’ accounts of their experiences in a themed writing course with a designated service-learning component. I bring to light how students see, value, and define what constitutes effective practices of care. My purpose is to make visible how exposure to carefully crafted readings, assignments, and discussions produce both possibilities and conflicts when attempting to cultivate care. My work poses new directions for complicating relationships between care ethics and service-learning and reveals a strong commitment to pedagogical scholars’ call for critical reflection (Rice and Pollack; Rosenberger; O’Grady; King).

Who Cares?

Care ethics intend to significantly impact how students engage with course materials. The teacher’s effectiveness in caring is directly tied to her ability to create the most effective conditions for the student. However, early versions of care ethics in education do not account for the complexities of relationships both inside and outside the classroom. For example, Nel Noddings, in her now foundational project, *A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, focuses on the necessary conditions that the one caring needs to create in order for the student to feel cared-for. Although Noddings provides her audience with concepts to guide the one caring to “feel with” another, the teacher is positioned to direct all of her energy towards the individual student and her/

his needs in the classroom.¹ Caring, then, is not understood for its ability to impact relationships existing outside of the classroom (Applebaum; Tronto; Clement). Thus, this “traditional” version of care unfortunately does very little to account for the “real world” in ways that progressive pedagogues like Paulo Freire and Ira Shor suggest.

My introductory writing course was constructed to challenge traditional notions of care ethics and, fundamentally, to make visible the role of care in the classroom as well as in service-learning sites. I placed value on the role of interpersonal relationships, as Noddings suggests, but worked to extend my understandings of these relationships. I turned toward a critical ethics of care in my practice and took time throughout the semester to expose how identities, experiences, and histories factored into our ability, and more importantly, our privilege to care as members of a private institution. In doing so, I drew on Fiona Robison’s *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory, and International Relations*. Robison develops the term “critical” care ethics to attend to how relationships to others are historically constructed. She reveals how our moral obligations are linked to oppressive historical practices, and she argues that only through critical reflection can we expose these multiple relationships to power. Thus, I saw consistent reflection of our moral obligations to others, including myself, as foundational to bringing about a critical ethics of care.

Throughout the semester, students engaged in theory, enacted the theory through service-learning sites, and then reflected on the most significant aspects of these processes. I believed the creation of carefully constructed readings and assignments might bring about a more complex and critical understanding and experience of care, although many scholars reveal that outcomes and intentions do not necessarily produce desired results (Tilley-Lubbs). My intentions were further complicated by the fact that students would be engaging with difficult course materials and would be placed in situations that may run counter to their previous experiences. Indeed, I anticipated significant challenges in fostering classroom conditions where students felt their experiences and identities were valued, and where these experiences and identities were situated alongside larger systems of power and oppression. However, despite these challenges, I imagined that confronting all of our expectations and assumptions would make visible multiple and competing relationships *to care*.

Framework

I designed the honors version of Syracuse University’s introductory writing course to encourage students to examine relationships among care, literacies, and service-learning. The course, “Fostering Community Engagement, Exploration, and Analysis in and around Education,” exposed students to theoretical debates regarding power and privilege, and students explored these issues through reading, writing, and experiences in service-learning sites. Students were placed in different literacy-based sites. These included working with younger students in afterschool programs and aiding teachers in

¹ Caring requires the suspension of the beliefs, motivations, and judgments of the one caring. Concepts like motivational displacement and engrossment guide the one caring in her/his ability to “feel with” another through the process of reception. For Noddings, this concept of receptivity is integral to effective caring (30).

a local middle school.² The course brought together theoretical discussions of identity, experience and history. It addressed theoretical and practical debates surrounding what it means to “do service,” mainly focusing on complicating interpersonal relationships. Throughout the semester, the course addressed current debates surrounding public and private education. The idea was to set strategically in motion particular ideas about encountering others (textually, physically, emotionally) *before* students entered a literacy-based service-learning site. Thus, the intention was to move students from a theoretical understanding of literacy, access, education, and care toward practical engagement, and then to urge them to continuously reflect on these processes. Students were asked to construct three formal papers: a general point of inquiry, a rhetorical and ideological analysis, and a final collaborative project. They also maintained a service-learning journal.

Care 101

Students were introduced to the complexities of care early on in the course. I wanted them to develop the personal engagement and investments that would allow them to participate effectively within their service-learning sites. To that end, I invited the class to develop a conceptual lens through which to assess, challenge, and refine how they made sense of their relationships to others. This work would help students examine relationships between “service” and “care.” Initially, students read Nel Noddings’ essay “Why Care About Caring?” In this essay, Noddings exposes the value of the interpersonal dimensions of care and asks readers to examine critically how *their* experiences and interests may affect accounts of care. Although Noddings does not directly address the relationships between service-learning and care ethics, her work challenges students to engage in practices of care in ways that are attentive to the needs, desires, and experiences of others.

We discussed the importance of a more historicized, more theoretical, and more responsible understanding of interpersonal relationships. Students were encouraged to complicate Noddings’ definition of care through postcolonial theory. Students drew from transnational feminist Sara Ahmed’s essay “Encountering Strangers,” which illuminates multiple relationships to power and privilege, and highlights the role of history in determining, but not predetermining, immediate relationships. Ahmed creates the concept of “encounter” to reveal relationships between histories of colonialism and the (re)production of varying relationships to power which are infused throughout our daily lives.

Students used these readings to expose emotional and physical barriers between the university and the community and to examine how care is inextricably linked to exclusion, privilege, and power. After conducting a series of observations of a designated space—usually a space “off of the hill”—students assessed how they inhabited the uni-

² The middle school that the students volunteered in consisted of predominantly African American students. Thus, racial differences posed a complex dynamic. In fact, “In 2010, T Aaron Levy Middle School had 81% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch programs” (<http://www.education.com/schoolfinder/us/new-york/syracuse/t-aaron-levy-middle-school/#students-and-teachers>)

versity space and related to others.³ Students exposed different barriers, drawing from David Sibley's "Geographies of Exclusion," and examined how their identities and experiences affected their readings of these spaces. They also drew from Minnie Bruce Pratt's essay, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart," as a model for exposing how their identities and experiences significantly affected their presence in these spaces.⁴

Students continued to explore and assess relationships through a focused rhetorical and ideological analysis of representations of education and literacies. Class discussions involved an examination of who was in a position of power—in a position to care—in relation to those who needed to be cared-for, or, according to students, those who needed to be "saved." Students discussed the movie *Freedom Writers*, a 2007 film about an idealistic white teacher who sets out to alter the lives of underprivileged high school youth. Conversations involved multiple assessments of racial and gendered dynamics of identities, oftentimes invoking the need to explore these issues through additional readings of power and privilege.⁵

The purpose of this rhetorical and ideological analysis was to get students to make ethical arguments about how they understood relationships to education in ways that were attentive to larger questions of access. We complicated concepts like "hard work" and "individual merit" through a discussion of how oppression is historically constructed. Students read Anyon's "From Social Class to the Hidden Curriculum of Work" as well as McNamee's and Miller's "The Myth of Meritocracy." Both of these essays reveal complex systems and practices that stifle individual success and merit. Students finished this unit with a careful reading of Kozol's *Shame of the Nation*, which offers an ethnographic account of racial segregation in education. All of these sources gave students access to more complex and thoughtful methods through which to understand the lives of others, especially in literacy-based sites.

The combination of readings afforded students with the ability to use their expertise to incite action. In their final collaborative research project, students created models of service-learning that addressed the relationships amongst care, citizenship, community activism and engagement. In order to do this successfully, they returned to notes, readings, and observations. They discussed, complicated, and challenged what they saw as the most memorable moments from the course. Students then demonstrated what they saw as the best theoretical model for making sense of their encounters in service-learning sites and made suggestions for the future of service-learning at the university, based on their engagement with essays that directly addressed the construction of service-learning in responsible ways (Rhoads; Barber and Battistoni).

³ See "Syracuse University Facts," <http://www.syr.edu/about/facts.html>.

⁴ Pratt uses narrative to illustrate how she experienced a more complex and layered understanding of the world through reflection; "So often we act out the present against a backdrop of the past, within a frame of perception that is so familiar, so safe, that it is terrifying to risk challenging (changing) it even when we know our perceptions are distorted, limited, constructed by that old view" (33).

⁵ Students read essays that addressed both gender and sexualities.

Methodology

I asked students to reflect on their experiences in the course. Participants were chosen, based on their willingness to complete a series of interviews that were conducted, tape recorded, and transcribed in Spring 2008, after students received their final grade in the course.⁶

Students were asked the following questions:

- What were your experiences of care?
- Can you provide examples of instances where you were given the opportunity to understand the perspectives of others?
- How did care factor into these interactions?
- How do you define/construct a definition of care that takes into account the identities and perspectives of students, on the one hand, and the lives and perspectives of others on the other?
- Do you feel that service-learning creates opportunities of care? Why/why not?
- Do you see the university enacting various systems of care? If so, how effective do you see this work? If not, explain why.

Students who agreed to participate in the study represent—but are certainly not representative of—classroom dynamics, attitudes, and levels of engagement with course material. Interview responses were initially read in light of the tensions between traditional and more complex understandings of care. In other words, I was trying to see if students mimicked traditional theories of care—those which involved the “good” citizen—thereby resisting a more complex and critical understanding of accountability, identity, and receptivity. I also was attentive to how theoretical concepts of power and privilege factored into their reflections. I wanted to get a rich sense of students’ learning in the course in ways that resisted a static representation of their processes as privileged members of the university community. Students interviewed ranged from 18-20 years of age, identified themselves as predominantly white, came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and were predominantly women. I tried to capture what I saw as the most striking resemblance of the *challenges* involved in bringing about conditions and practices of care—both in the classroom and in the service-learning environment—and how those challenges related to students’ experiences and identities. I was hopeful that my study would expose gaps, potentials, and potential pitfalls of bringing together care ethics, literacies, and service-learning. Thus, my energy was to follow Kevin Kumashiro’s call in *Troubling Education* to look beyond theory and to turn towards students’ perspectives in order to sufficiently assess what we do in the classroom.

⁶ I created the dimensions of this particular study in the summer of 2007, and received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University prior to the beginning of the fall semester. Students were provided with pseudonyms for the study.

Students' Readings of Relationships

Based on the findings of my interviews, students stressed the need for close relationships that revealed a commitment to *their* needs and identities in order for conditions of care to emerge. They complicated different aspects of these relationships and highlighted the effects they have on the most conducive conditions of and for care. Students discussed the complexities of encountering others in service-learning sites and revealed how they encountered texts. Although students posed different ideas about how to bring about conditions of care—and consequently change—they all agreed on the importance of classrooms that are open and welcoming to their identities, opinions, experiences and beliefs.

Students discussed how difficult it was to connect to others, even though readings and discussions were intended to prepare them for multiple encounters in their service-learning sites. Kayle, for example, upon being placed in an after-school study program for middle-school children, recounted her observation of an interaction between a student and a teacher. The interaction struck a chord with her because the student, a young girl, in Kayle's words, had "terrible grammar." Kayle was shocked that the teacher neglected to correct the girl's grammar.

Kayle explains:

I was really confused as to how she got that far in school without understanding simple grammar rules, and it was just an insight into the quality of education and the way that education is addressed in these schools and the ways that students seemed to be just shuttled through it, you know? There were standards in my school, and if you didn't meet them, then you got held back and the teachers made sure.

Kayle's response highlighted a large gap between her experiences in education and those that she observed in the middle school. She revealed how her beliefs, values, and experiences prevented her from making sense of the complexities of this interaction. Indeed, the conflict appeared to be not only between herself and the student but also between herself and the teacher. This interaction suggests Kayle's difficulty making sense of the complex institutional context in which such an interaction could occur.

This interaction proved to be very significant to Kayle. She talked about how, in the past, she did not have a difficult time talking to others, mainly because they had similar experiences. Implicit here are her relationships to language and privilege; either she had been disciplined for her lack of "proper" English, or she had been conditioned through her experiences that "proper" English is the most accepted way of speaking. The evident lack of understanding of different relationships to language left Kayle confused and angry that the teacher was doing the student disservice. Thus, as she reflected on this experience, she explained that this encounter, as well as others, positioned her as "very distant" from the students at her service-learning site.

Later, Kayle revealed another instance where her values and opinions were in conflict with those she was exposed to at the middle school. She witnessed a teacher telling an African American student to "leave your ghetto-fabulous attitude at the door." She explained that this was an interaction she had never heard before, and that it "threw her

off.” Her reading of the institutional space differed from her definitions of what constituted caring classroom conditions. What Kayle valued as care—a student’s ability to express herself in a classroom—was stifled. In her view, a caring classroom was one where students’ experiences and identities were welcomed in an institutional context. Yet, based on her reading of the relationship between teacher and student, she viewed this learning environment as being devoid of care. Telling a student to “leave their attitude at the door,” according to Kayle, does not create a caring environment

Kayle’s reflection illustrated the complexities of these experiences in service-learning sites. She examined power differences and highlighted distinct boundaries between herself and the experiences of others. These differences emerged not only from her experiences in education, but also from her experiences outside of the classroom. However, she argued that the *process* of learning about others was really “intriguing” to her because she identified herself as an “open” person. At the end of the interview, Kayle revealed her desire to explore alternative perspectives through service-learning and volunteering at the university.

Another student, Jayne, discussed how her service-learning site functioned as a space where she was unable, based on what she identified as “cultural differences” to connect to others. Jayne highlighted how she had to take a step back and begin to understand her own identities and assumptions in relationship to her mentee. For example, when her mentee came to school with a broken school binder, Jayne noted that she felt compelled to buy the little girl a new one because, as she said, “What’s two bucks?” Thus, Jayne revealed her commitment to care in her desire to provide the little girl with functional educational materials. However, Jayne also made explicit the need to be attentive to the desires of others. When the girl indicated that she and her mother simply could not afford a new binder, Jayne reconsidered her initial desire to “save” her mentee. She explained:

And that made me think, would that make it inappropriate for me to get her a new binder? I had to think of how her mother would react—well her adopted mother because she has been switching homes—but how she [the adopted mother] would react to her [the little girl] coming home from the mentoring program with a gift—not even a gift, but something that was like a necessity. So, you know, I decided I didn’t want to because I never had met her mother before and didn’t know how she would react. I decided not to get her the binder, but instead I got her a gift that was more trivial, because I wasn’t sure where the boundaries were on that. So, I mean, it has just been a different experience trying to understand boundaries for people who have different backgrounds. And I guess I would call it culture. I think it is a different culture too.

Jayne discussed what she saw as a significant moment highlighting boundaries between herself and the little girl. She exposed a disconnect between competing value systems and illustrated how she made sense of the significance of these boundaries. While she argued that she still felt distant from the little girl, she indicated that she was “beginning to understand.”

Jayne’s insight crystallized how her discomfort factored into getting her to think critically about some of the assumptions she brought to the service-learning site. Her version of care involved building a relationship with this young woman, and included an

assessment of needs. Jayne brought to light a variety of competing theories about what constitutes care—mainly based on some of the underlying assumptions that the one caring brings to a particular encounter. She was aware of how her beliefs factored into the caring situation, and she emphasized the role of reflection. Jayne delineated these as integral to attachment. Indeed, she became conscious of her relationship to power and privilege, as she revealed her commitment to respect the girl's wishes.

In other cases, students did not always delineate how to address boundaries between themselves and those that they encountered in service-learning sites. For example, Catherine argued that she did not have the “temperament” to continue this kind of work. For her, growing up in a “white, homogenous, suburban school district” drastically affected her ability to successfully work with students in her service-learning site. During the interview, Catherine identified the kind of temperament necessary to work with middle school students in the after-school program. She discussed her lack of experience with “non-white” students:

Just because you grew up in a 97% white school district, you cannot work in urban schools, but it helps to have this experience [of urban schools]. I mean, what do you know about urban schools? You went to a rich white school district, you went to a rich white college. What do you know about what we are doing? I mean, I don't have a clue.

In her reflection, Catherine was aware of the impact of her identity on actually caring for students. She identified race as a key factor in bringing about care in an educational site. Catherine presented a complex account of how racial difference in her service-learning site created distinct boundaries. Interestingly, though, despite her indication that she lacked the temperament to work with students in urban schools, she quickly made the claim that background does not necessarily mean that you cannot be in these sites. Thus, through the interview, she resisted making a definitive claim about the impact of different racial backgrounds in the enactment of care.⁷ Further, it is not clear whether or not Catherine believed she could actually effect change.

Catherine's version of care revealed an awareness of how difference factored into the caring situation. If the one caring should be attentive to the desires, beliefs, and experiences of others, then Catherine's reflection suggested that similarities produce more amenable conditions through which to produce care. Significantly, she did not say that she could not care, but instead, that her abilities to care were constrained by her difference as a white student who grew up with little to no (identifiable) exposure to what she saw as difference. Thus, Catherine's discussion of the visibility of difference in situations that involve care merely point to the significance of commonality. She indicated that she was unsure of her abilities and raised attention to the role of conflict in actually bringing about care and connection with others. What was striking about her reflection was the way she resisted a traditional narrative involving white privilege. That is, she did not create a narrative espousing the idea that we were all the same. Rather, she seemed, incredibly aware of how race factored—both hers and the race of those she encountered.

⁷ Catherine indicates that her identities affected the extent to which she was able to attach to the lives of others. That is, our approach to *Shame of the Nation* helped her see how her own experiences of and with race, positioned her

Textual Encounters

The interview questions were also designed to encourage students to discuss the value of texts in their understandings and experiences of care. I wanted to see if readings significantly influenced the way that they thought about care and consequently practiced care outside of our classroom. This analysis would allow me to see what students took from the readings and whether or not particular readings engendered complex, critical understandings of care. Indeed, student interviews revealed the value and influence of texts in understanding the complexities of care. When asked to reflect on their most significant experiences in understanding the perspectives of others, students almost unanimously interpreted this question as involving readings and discussions from the course. Most students interviewed referred to a particular class session where we discussed the impact of identities on access to education. Surprisingly, Catherine, Kayle, and Caleb, another student in the study, each drew attention to discussions where we examined the impact of gender on identities.

Catherine used the readings as a springboard to discuss how she had previously been punished for not adhering to gender roles. She indicated that her experiences with gender were easy to share, given the exploratory environment of the classroom: "I have opinions about that which were pretty solid, like the story of my ex boyfriend who asked me why I didn't dress in something that was feminine." Catherine discussed the difficulties she had experienced, given her own relationships to gender identities, sexuality, and the eradication of oppression: "I was kind of in the middle. I wasn't with the boys who [thought] that is a load of crap, and I wasn't like, oh yeah, women are oppressed. So I was half way, and it was difficult for me to identify with people."

Similarly, Kayle referred to a particular moment in the course when students disagreed about the tensions between individual choice and gender performance:

We had read something about kids who had decided that they were the opposite gender, and when they were really young they decided that, and so we had a discussion pushing creating women's roles and men's roles. And I remember talking about how I was quite the tomboy when I was younger, and having someone tell me that those basketball shoes are boys' shoes, and I felt comfortable that I could share that in our class—my unique experiences to the discussion—and that it would be addressed and acknowledged when we were discussing this topic.

She positioned herself as struggling with gender constructions and expectations, based on an incident when she was penalized as a young girl for "choosing" to defy gender expectations. Her "unique" experience provided a way through which to connect to larger struggles related to gender construction—in this particular case, a larger discussion of the visibility of a transgendered community.

Both women acknowledged different understandings of the same readings. Each exposed how their identities and experiences served as a starting point for making sense of difference. Experiences were used to directly connect and relate to course material, and students' representations reveal a somewhat superficial and individualistic understanding of the relationships between gender and sexualities and oppression. Because

each student discussed difficulties adhering to standards of masculinity and femininity, they revealed a clear connection to how identities and experiences mattered on a larger level. However, it is not clear the extent to which these readings directly impacted how they understood the complexities of a critical care—both in terms of their own genders and sexualities, as well as how they may have engaged with others in an institutional context.

On the other hand, Caleb presented a different reading of gender, sexuality, and oppression. Rather than revealing a personal connection to the readings, Caleb referred to this class to indicate his distance from the readings. In other words, Caleb used his identity to disconnect from the readings. Caleb explained,

We did a lot of reading on transgender people, and that was enlightening, and I hadn't really thought about it before then, and we did a number of readings on that. And I found that that was helpful to understand more of what they were going through, to understand the situation better.

This passage revealed Caleb's discomfort, as he repeated the idea that we "did a lot of readings of that" during the interview. But while he explained that the readings helped him understand, his discussion of his encounters with the readings revealed more of an inability to take his engagement one step further. In other words, he distanced himself from the readings, even as he asserted a connection. During the interview, he discussed his relationship to his girlfriend, confirming his heterosexuality, rather than outlining specific details about what was "most helpful" in the texts. Thus, he highlighted the problems of fear and instability in the process of beginning to care—indicating that to care, students may need to experience moments of stability, and in the process, they may invoke their privilege in order to maintain stability.

Students shed light on the difficulties of reading about the complexities of a critical ethics, and then explaining how their readings led to significant classroom discussions. In some cases, students used their lack of privilege—in terms of gendered oppression—to connect to texts. In other situations, students relied on their privilege to determine the extent to which they connected to readings.

Overall, students' experiences in the course revealed the extent to which their identities, experiences, and histories factored into their ability to be engaged in *critical* practices of care. As Robison suggests, their engagement with gender and sexualities in these interviews, or their engagement with racial differences in the previous interviews, reveals in turn just how difficult it is to confront the impact of various aspects of identities on our moral obligations to be accountable to others.

Student Recommendations

All students expressed the need for an open and safe environment for care to occur. All students outlined significant classroom moments where they felt that they were being cared for. Their definitions of care involved how they were situated in class discussions. Thus, students created clear links between a classroom space that is open to a series of opinions about difficult topics, and feeling cared-for. Most students emphasized not feeling punished or ostracized for their opinions, especially if those differed from some of

the more difficult course materials and topics. Thus, they revealed the role of emotions in the cultivation of a caring classroom, even as they argued for particular classroom conditions.

Catherine, a self-identified shy student, indicated that classroom discussions about inequality and oppression oftentimes compelled her to present her opinion—an opinion that she saw as valued in our classroom: “If it felt like it was important enough to say something, I didn’t feel like I would be penalized or humiliated or whatever.” In the interview, she discussed a particular class where students were introduced to Marilyn Frye’s illustration of the systemic nature of oppression.⁸ “And I wasn’t crazy about her whole thing about holding doors, and you said that you didn’t agree with us that she was too far, but I still made my case because people were going to listen and not make fun of me.” Catherine proclaimed that she did not experience a sense of shame because she felt part of the community. She stressed the role of productive conflict in care insofar as differing opinions about the readings were present. However, she highlighted the extent to which she was granted the ability to speak.

Similarly, Caleb indicated that being cared-for involved being able to voice one’s individual opinions in the classroom. He explained, “I felt that I could really express some of my opinions, and that we really connected with each other ... so I didn’t feel as hesitant to say what I thought.” Caleb made the role of institutional power and authority and its connection to care visible through his discussion. Instead of highlighting the role of shame in presenting opinions that may differ in the classroom, Caleb discussed the role of punishment:

You didn’t get in trouble if you said you didn’t like the readings or you didn’t agree with them. As long as you did the work, you could say mostly whatever you wanted, as long as it wasn’t directed at someone in the class, I guess, or hurtful to anyone in class. I mean, it was an open atmosphere and easy to voice your opinions, as long as they were based on the work in class—generally, at least.

In both of these cases, students felt cared-for because they perceived the freedom to express their opinions. Their readings and opinions mattered.

The fact that the classroom was “discussion-based” allowed Kayle the ability to share aspects of herself. She created a definition of “openness” which draws attention to the general set-up of the course:

It was just the general air of the class that I felt that I could always speak my mind when we are having discussions, regardless of the topics, and I could always put my two cents in. And other people would counter it, or agree with it, or whatever, but it was really open.

⁸ Students read Marilyn Frye’s “Oppression,” which provided them with one method through which to understand the complexities of an immediate situation. Frye used the example of a man holding a door for a woman. On an immediate level, this act can be read as one of kindness. However, on a historical level, it can be read as part of a larger system of oppression that maintains gendered divisions.

Kayle highlighted the ways that she read the classroom space in general—as being one that welcomed her contribution. She further argued that care mostly manifests in the teacher’s willingness and openness to hear what the students have to say within this type of environment: “And also, not to just hear what they are saying, but also to think about it and relate to it and be able to talk to them about it, whether it be in a discussion in class or outside of class, but, you know, wanting to hear what the students have to say.” Her idea of openness lent itself to a classroom environment where multiple kinds of opinions and experiences made their way into classroom conversations and discussions. Thus, she noted that within a classroom of “openness,” conflicting opinions and values have a presence.

Jayne also contributed to these ideas about openness but directly addressed the idea of safety. For Jayne, a “safe-zone” was a classroom space where the teacher did not force her opinions onto students, but rather created an environment where students were given the opportunity to critically assess different aspects of arguments:

We had a hard time seeing where your opinion was. It wasn’t like you were on the one-person side. Sometimes you played the devil’s advocate, as far as allowing everybody to express their views in a safe zone, which I think is really important because sometimes you get some really strong willed teachers who are really intimidating for some of the students to even present their ideas, even if they’re similar to theirs. . . because you know, a lot of the time students are not even sure what they think. They just kind of need to talk about it before they can sort out what their ideas or views are even.

Jayne discussed the ways that a “safe zone” allowed students the ability to jump into conversations with ease. She also suggested that this “safe zone” encouraged students to explore their opinions without being explicitly influenced by the professor’s opinions. Safety required the teacher to be conscious of the ways she expressed her viewpoints so that she did not necessarily silence students, but rather, allowed them to make decisions about where they stood when various knowledge claims were set in motion.

Students began with a discussion of how open-discussions and ideas about “safety” affected the extent to which they felt cared-for in the learning environment. In most of these cases, students made visible the role of institutional structures in determining—but not predetermining—the extent to which they felt cared-for. In all of their responses, students referred to a series of classroom based discussions and/or interactions with teachers. Being cared-for—in all student responses—did not extend outside of the classroom environment. Rather, students emphasized their ability to engage with course materials, each other, and their teacher.

Although students’ discussion of safety involved a classroom space where they felt cared-for, they had mixed feelings about how varying opinions and value systems impacted practices of care within the service-learning sites. They presented conflicting views about the role of embodied encounters in bringing about the conditions of and for care. Jayne, for example, argued that you can “care” about someone that you just met, but to actually be attached to someone involves a much more complex process. Jayne used the concept of empathy to further describe these distinctions: “But to be attached to somebody, I feel is kind of like a more empathetic aspect. You have to be able to learn to understand them more and . . . to be aware and be able to see where they are coming

from.” Her account of care emphasized the willingness to not only reflect on particular assumptions, but also to begin the process of connecting beyond a superficial encounter.

Some students argued for the role of practical and embodied encounters with others in bringing about effective care. Caleb indicated that we did enough reading in the course about various groups, yet he argued that he would understand them better if he met them. “I think that it is kind of difficult without meeting them because it is still disembodied, and hard to make a connection.” In another example, Caleb identified the limitations of texts as the most effective method for attaching to, or engaging with, others. He referred to one of his current courses where they were discussing how pictures of starving children in Africa were supposed to elicit emotional responses:

I think that a lot more people would be changed to do something for it, and understand it, if they went to Africa or to some other place that needed help. And just seeing it in pictures. . . . It doesn't bring you there, and you don't experience it first hand and it is still disembodied, I guess.

Caleb refined his definition of embodiment by contrasting it with practices in other institutional spaces where people are told to assume the role of the “other” for a day. However, Caleb revealed that engaging in this practice for a day is “not even a comparison” to the real conditions of others. Instead, he argued that *everyone* should be face-to-face with others. Thus, he saw real limitations in both visual and textual representations of others. Significantly, Caleb compared these with the first-hand knowledge he gained through his service-learning experiences in our course. Thus, his account challenges pedagogues to be attentive to various methods that cultivate care, as well as how students read the value and purpose of these methods.

What We Learn about Care and Service

In her work, Noddings highlights how the caring situation occurs in a classroom. Little to no work extends beyond the immediacy of the classroom and into situations where students must care for others. Students may thus create definitions of care that situate their perspectives and experiences in the classroom, with little to no description of how these experiences and insights might relate to—or more importantly, affect—others. This approach does not illustrate a critical definition of care ethics. It only reveals conditions that are directly tied to and limited by the confines of the classroom.

However, students provide valuable insight into the usefulness of employing an institutionalized version of care ethics through their reflections on readings and writing assignments, if they concurrently have experiences in service-learning. Then, students' responses may highlight values of care that are more directly tied to what extends beyond immediate classroom relationships.

Even so, these responses leave a lot of unanswered questions about the limitations and possibilities of caring when students directly confront oppression, privilege, and exploitation. The ways that students represent their experiences may leave professors resistant to creating a “safe” or “open” space for students to explore difference, especially if students assume the space to assimilate information about others in ways that gloss

over, rather than critically assess perspectives, experiences, and identities that are counter to their own.

Students create multiple ideas about the most effective conditions of learning to bring about social change and care. Students argue that sustained relationships in immediate contexts are significant in giving them the opportunities to attach to others. Many students in this study discussed the significance of their individual encounters as being moments that challenged some of their assumptions. They provided insight into the messiness and complexities of developing relationships with those who were different. For some students, these differences provoked in them a willingness to learn more; in other cases, these differences served as a disconnect. Students' "willingness" to challenge cultural representations and to see beyond their experiences were integral to caring.

The strategies or stances that I thought were most inextricably linked to care ethics, social justice, and service-learning did not neatly translate in practice—if they translated at all. Students were offered several models for exploring the complexities of power and privilege, and the course was designed as a space where students analyzed, assessed, and experienced the complex relationships that emerge between education and care. However, the ways that care is defined and made intelligible—by students, by teachers, by those who are represented as assumedly in need of care—*matter*. My experience teaching a course that centered on questions of care, where students were provided with both readings and practical experiences in service-learning, has taught me significant lessons. I did not necessarily learn about the perfect model for bringing about care in a classroom. Instead, I learned about the crucial questions and choices colleges and universities need to raise if they value community service that is linked to both care and social justice.

This study also draws attention to the difficulties involved in representing how students engage with alternative ways of thinking and being, regardless of whether these encounters are textual or embodied in service-learning sites. Interviews with students reveals the amount of emotional and unconscious work involved in their learning and reflective processes. Thus, future research needs to account for how these complexities factor into the learning environment. As a feminist researcher emotionally invested in the course, I find it difficult to represent others.

Further, only the students whom I interviewed indicated that they felt cared-for. This small percentage of the student body does not necessarily account for students who may not have felt cared-for and consequently did not volunteer to participate in the study. Future studies should produce additional ways through which students who did not feel cared-for and did not engage in practices of care could candidly represent these experiences, free of institutional constraints.

Moreover, although I carefully sequenced a series of readings and written assignments—beginning with traditional understandings of care ethics and complicating these definitions through postcolonial theory and readings on service-learning—student interviews did not necessarily reveal the understandings of care, social justice, and service-learning that I intended. In other words, I cannot claim that I established the most effective learning conditions. Therefore, future work on students' readings of the relationships between care ethics, service-learning, and social justice pedagogy needs to be completed. Students provide an account of the learning environment and the learn-

ing process that resists a neat and defined account of care that can promote change beyond our classrooms.

In *The Future of Service Learning*, Strait, Lima, and Furco echo this sentiment. They argue that the future of service-learning *depends* on theorists' and practitioner's abilities to continuously refine, revise, and reflect on our practices. This future, they indicate, requires us to bring together the most effective theories, practices, and strategies, to work with students and community members to incite change (6-7).



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