

Utilizing Technology to Develop and Maintain Professional Caring Relationships

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Abstract. Care is the cornerstone of all successful education. Teacher educators who care deeply about their teacher candidates are the heart of purposeful teaching. A positive professional relationship with a teacher educator can drastically impact a teacher candidate's collegiate experience in areas of scholarship, motivation, engagement, and self-confidence. Yet many college students report never having developed a caring relationship with a professor. Technology offers a unique opportunity for teacher educators to develop caring professional relationships with teacher candidates. Today's teacher candidates are constantly connected, spending over 6 hours daily on their electronic devices. Teacher educators should use technology to their advantage to meet students where they are: on their devices. Teacher educators serve as role models to teacher candidates who will ultimately care about their future K-12 students as they were cared for. Teacher educators should utilize technology to develop, strengthen, and maintain caring professional relationships with teacher candidates by setting up meaningful avenues of communication, modelling a professional online presence, and praising teacher candidates. The role of teacher educators is crucial, but few studies have examined the significance of teacher educators as caring role models. This article reviews relevant literature and offers three technology-fused suggestions which teacher educators can utilize to develop, foster, and maintain caring professional relationships. Findings from this literature review indicate there is a need for further empirical research.

Keywords: technology; care; relationships; teacher education; social media

Introduction

The preparation of mentoring caring teacher candidates should be a high priority in teacher education programs. Care can not just be taught implicitly through coursework. Teacher educators need to find innovative ways to explicitly demonstrate caring relationships with teacher candidates throughout their teacher preparation program (Noddings, 2005; Sanderse, 2012). One way to

do this is by integrating technology to support and enhance the teacher educator-teacher candidate relationship. Technologies are positively changing the communication and instructional landscape among teacher educators and teacher candidates. Teacher educators need to utilize of the power of modern technology to develop, foster, and maintain professional caring relationships with teacher candidates.

Method

This paper is a literature review on technology and the professional teacher educator-teacher candidate relationship. A thorough search of Academic Search Complete, ERIC, and Google Scholar was employed using the keywords: *technology, academic care, relationships, social media, praise and communication*. Research was reviewed from all dates yet particular attention was paid to the most relevant studies. The research was reviewed and is organized for this article into three primary sections including the importance of academic care, the power of technology, and suggestions to integrate technology-fused platforms to enhance caring relationships. Three recommendations are provided including setting up meaningful avenues of communication, modelling a professional online presence, and praising teacher candidates. The literature review closes with a discussion of possible limitations and implications for future research.

The Importance of Academic Care

Many would agree that teachers who care deeply about their students are the heart of purposeful teaching (Boyer, 2010). In fact, care is often listed as a quality of an effective teacher (Lumpkin, 2008; Noddings, 2005; Sanderse, 2012). The concept of care in schools is so important that in 2005, Nadge coined the term *academic care* as helping students “to develop positive self-esteem and feelings of well-being and self-efficacy through the school’s academic and organizational structures, and through adults’ relationships with students” (p. 28). In other words, caring teachers strive to make school a positive learning experience for all children (Williams, Sullivan & Kohn, 2012). Effective academic care is often embedded in pedagogy and student learning experiences.

Teachers who exhibit academic care listen, compliment students, foster emotional well-being, and take time to understand their students’ physical and emotional needs (Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001). It has been shown that when students feel genuine and sustainable care from their teacher, they work harder academically, are more engaged and spend more time on-task, experience improvement in academic performance and overall development, and have more confidence to learn (Making Caring Common Project, 2016; Nadge, 2005; Tosolt, 2010; Velasquez, Graham, & Osguthorpe, 2013). In classrooms across America, students are positively impacted by caring teachers (Tippens, 2012).

However, with federal government regulations and programs such as *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*, academic achievement has become the primary focus in schools, leaving developmental soft skills like care behind. Published in 2014, Harvard’s Make Caring Common Project asked children to rank in order of

importance: “achieving at a high level, being a happy person, or caring for others” (p. 6). The results indicated eighty percent of students selected either achievement or happiness as most important, leaving only 20% who ranked caring for others as their top priority. A self-reported low emphasis on caring for others is concerning.

Weissbourd and Jones (2014), leaders of the Making Caring Common Project explain, there is an obvious gap between the way we expect children to develop and the actual message children receive. In other words, children know the focus of school - achievement, awards, and success - because it is preached to them implicitly and explicitly on a daily basis. There is an evident pressure to retain knowledge and perform well on assessments. And some claim that current achievement-focused education places too strong an emphasis on academic success through testing and discourages opportunities for exploration, discovery, and expression (Noddings, 2005; Lumpkin, 2008). Ravitch (2016) may have said it best:

Not everything that matters can be quantified. What is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested... If we do not treasure our individualists, we will lose the spirit of innovation, inquiry, imagination, and dissent that has contributed powerfully to the success of our society in many different fields of endeavor (p. 242).

Educators can place more of an emphasis on caring for, developing, and treasuring each individual child despite the pressures of academic success. In 1971, Blume reported, “teachers teach as they are taught, and not as they are taught to teach.” (p. 412). We can make the transition to say teacher candidates will care as they are cared for by their teacher educators. Therefore, it is important for teacher educators to show that they care for their teacher candidates throughout their teacher preparation program. One way to do so is by developing and maintaining a strong classroom climate and community utilizing modern technology.

The Power of Technology

As part of the connected age, today’s teacher candidates are immersed in technology. The average college student owns seven electronic devices and spends more than five hours a week scrolling their social media accounts (Crux Research Center, 2013; Higher Research Institute, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2015). Information is readily available with the touch of a fingertip or a single voice-activated phrase. Current college students (ages 18-23) thrive in an “always on” hyper-communicative environment, connected to resources, to other people, to other devices, and even to oneself (Barnes & Mattson, 2010; Skiba, 2014). Many of today’s teacher candidates may feel lost and anxious without their devices, which serve as security blankets and mediums to meet spouses, stream a favorite television series, and even order pizza. Yet, there is much debate about incorporating technology in the classroom.

Of course, opponents of technology integration argue technology is detrimental to the faculty and student relationship. Most teacher educators who use technology platforms to communicate with students do so outside of class. After

hour faculty-student communication can be a slippery slope with late night texting, boundaries, privacy concerns, and misunderstandings. In 2014, Drive West Communications reported 782 total cases of public school employees either accused or charged for inappropriate relationships with students. Of those cases 38% were related to social media technology communication. Teacher educators must set appropriate clear guidelines, expectations, and boundaries when using technology communication platforms. Millennials thrive on technology and specifically prefer low-cost technology options such as texting. Technology supported options can assist with student retention by increasing communication and developing relationships (Adams, 2011; Pollock, Amaechi, Robichaux & O'Brien 2012).

Increasing connectivity provides a new level of accessibility and communication; an asset to teacher educators who are seeking innovative ways to connect and develop caring relationships with teacher candidates. Because of the pervasive acceptance of technology, teacher educators cannot afford to fall behind in their technology usage and knowledge. More and more, teacher candidates expect not only their classrooms but their faculty to be technology supported (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011).

Suggestions to Integrate Technology-Fused Platforms to Enhance Caring Relationships

Teacher educators can capitalize on the opportunity to develop caring relationships with teacher candidates while they seek guidance and instruction in their courses. According to Sanderse (2012), teacher educators are often aware that “they should ‘teach as they preach’ and ‘walk their talk,’ but fail to connect their ideals to their actual behaviour in the classroom” (p. 38). For most teacher educators, preparing teacher candidates for character education is often done implicitly through modelling; the teacher educator’s primary focus is on pedagogy, philosophy, management, and content (Sanderse, 2012). As Lunenberg, Korthagen, and Swennen (2007) explain, modelling appropriate behaviors is only one step in developing a caring relationship. In order for teacher candidates to truly master a concept, theory, or behavior, they must hear and read about it, experience it, and reflect upon it. With curricular mandates, limited time, and committee work, it may be easier for teacher educators to talk about academic care than carry out its intentions (O'Brien, 2010; Lunenburg et al., 2007; Sanacore, 2008). Teacher educators can place more of an emphasis on explicitly teaching caring behaviors by being reflective in their own practices (Eisner, 2002; Sanderse, 2012).

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) (2008) has developed teacher standards which define the evolving skills and pedagogical insights in education thus providing a technology framework for educators. One standard explains the importance of employing digital etiquette or netiquette when communicating with students (ISTE, 2008). Common sense media (2011) provides tips for netiquette including, being cognizant of context and privacy, reviewing responses for grammar and respect prior to sending. Fortunately, technology-based communication tools provide more communication

mechanisms than traditional methods and offer a way to increase and strengthen effective communication between teacher educators and millennial teacher candidates (Nygard, Day, Fricke, & Knowlton, 2014; Kassen-Noor, 2012;).

As Bowen (2012) posits, implementing technology-fused communication “help[s] bridge the power differential inherent in education;” technology especially on one’s phone which is considered typical communication for today’s teacher candidates (p. 31). In fact, this may be the best place to build, foster, and maintain caring relationships. Pollock et al. (2012) found students whose teachers used technology-fused tools to communicate felt not only more supported, but more cared for as an individual and a student, which led to overall increased motivation and effort in the course.

During a keynote address Russell (1999) emphasized, “If genuine change is to occur in schools, then those changes may have to occur FIRST in teacher education.” Teacher candidates often understand the academic and social expectations of a school, but the importance of caring for others is not explicit. By discussing caring expectations, modelling them, and integrating them into daily practice, teacher candidates will have a better understanding of what they really mean. So they can effectively develop caring professional relationships with their future P-12 students. This literature review suggests teacher educators use technology as a powerful tool to develop, foster, and maintain relationships. Teacher educators who infuse technology in and out of the classroom help strengthen relationships by affording teacher candidates the opportunity to maximize learning and enhance communication in familiar “connected” environments (Crews & Stitt-Gohdes, 2012). I suggest those who are seeking ways to develop, strengthen, and maintain caring relationships with teacher candidates utilize technology-fused platforms by:

- Setting up meaningful avenues of communication
- Modelling professional online presence
- Praising teacher candidates

Setting up meaningful avenues of communication

Setting up meaningful avenues of communication is a key component and crucial part of developing caring relationships. Communication between faculty and students was listed as one of the best practices in higher education (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996). In order to effectively set up meaningful avenues of communication such as texting and virtual office hours, all communication mechanisms (e.g., email, phone numbers, office hours) should be clearly indicated in the course syllabus (Bowen, 2012).

By providing effective and comfortable avenues of communication through technology, teacher educators can help foster the fleeting teacher educator-teacher candidate relationship. Email drastically opened the communication lines over a decade ago. Now, college students are inundated with emails; many rarely check, forget to check, or look over important course-related emails (Rubin, 2013). A 2014 study found college students used email approximately six

minutes a day (Junco, 2014). Currently texting services are pushing the communication envelope by increasing the accessibility of teacher educators. According to the 2014 Gallup poll, texting is the preferred communication mechanism for individuals under 50 years old. On a daily basis, 68% of 18-29 year olds indicate they send and/or receive text messages “a lot.” (Pew Research Center, 2015). For teacher educators, free text chats sent directly to a phone through platforms like *Remind*, *Google Voice*, *GroupMe* or *Cel.ly* are alternative ways to reach candidates. Teacher educators can use one-way or conversational texting options to communicate announcements, reminders, or respond to teacher candidate questions.

Implementing virtual office hours through email, texting, alternative messaging, and video chatting can be an effective way to reach more teacher candidates (Bowen, 2012). In a recent survey, college students reported “no longer wanting to come to office hours;” because it is a style of meeting that is dated and inconvenient to commuters, student athletes, students who work, or students who may not be available during traditional work hours (Bowen, 2012, p. 32). Free video chat options such as *Google Hangouts* or *Skype* provide an even greater opportunity for face-to-face contact with teacher candidates, which can help foster caring professional relationships. For current college students, a quick virtual face-to-face conversation may be easier and more natural than devising a long email. A teacher educator’s office hours are essentially extended by appointment; making it possible for relationships to develop without a teacher candidate coming in to seek help in specified time slots. Teacher educators using *Remind* can also personalize office hours, which can assist in setting some work day parameters.

Although many teacher educators may not yet feel comfortable meeting online, Bowen (2012) suggests, and I agree, that we need to get there for our teacher candidates. Using technologies as an avenue for communication assists in building a caring, compassionate teacher educator-teacher candidate relationship.

Modelling a professional online presence

For many teacher educators and teacher candidates alike, creating and modelling a professional social media account is becoming almost as common as using a professional email address. ISTE (2008) standards explain the importance of teachers “advocating, modelling, and teaching safe, legal and ethical use of digital information and technology”. Crews and Stitt-Gohdes (2012) confirm that it is the teacher educator's responsibility to teach teacher candidates how to effectively use technology to promote professional caring relationships with future students and colleagues. Teacher educators must explicitly model appropriate professional online presence and explain to teacher candidates the dangers of inappropriate use so they feel confident fostering relationships through technology in their future classrooms.

Teacher educators nationwide have demonstrated their interest in using social media as a way to connect and build relationships through personal and

professional learning networks (PLNs) (Schroeder, Minocha, & Schneider, 2010). Sharing educational resources through websites such as *ShareMyLesson*, *ShareSlides*, *Pinterest*, and *TeachersPayTeachers* can help build PLNs. Weekly *Twitter* chats and *YouTube* screencasts are also assisting teacher educators in building powerful PLNs. Demonstrating how teacher educators use their PLN relationships to gain knowledge and insight is effective to model for teacher candidates.

Technology, like social networking websites, can create safe, comfortable environments, critical for building rapport and developing relationships with teacher candidates as well as provide a platform to integrate ideas, apply knowledge and influence student culture (Bowen, 2012; Schroeder et al., 2010). Maintaining stringent safety settings by disabling posting to public forums is a critical responsibility of the teacher candidate. Social media platforms offer alternative methods to developing caring relationships. In educational settings, teacher candidates favor social networking platforms such as *Twitter*, *Snapchat*, *Pinterest*, and *Instagram* because the user can choose to “follow” their teacher educator but keep their posts, videos and photographs private. Some college students have reported feeling pressured into accepting a follow/friend request from their professor, which hinders privacy and negates efforts to establish a healthy, caring relationship (Karl & Peluchette, 2011; Young, 2009). Other networking websites like *LinkedIn* and *Google+* (G+) have been publicized as being more professional networking websites but are less popular with millennial college students (Bowen, 2012). Again, when teacher educators use these websites and phone applications, it is essential to model a professional online presence by not blurring any personal lines with teacher candidates (Bowen, 2012; Junco, 2014). The privacy needs of teacher candidates should always be considered a top priority. Currently little research is available on the impact of the currently more popular social media platforms.

Finally, social media management tools like *Hootsuite* and *Buffer* allow users to manage their professional *LinkedIn*, *G+*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* accounts in one click. These management tools allow the teacher educator to post course announcements and photographs to multiple social media platforms at once not only saving time but reaching more candidates.

Praising teacher candidates

Some will argue that praise is not necessary at the collegiate level especially in our 21st century overly praised “everyone gets a trophy” society (Twenge & Campbell, 2010). But according to Noddings (2005), the desire to be cared for is “almost certainly a universal human characteristic” (p. 17). Despite societal praises, reports indicate only one third of children believe their teachers care for them (Cole & Cole, 1989). Authentically praising teacher candidates is one way teacher educators can demonstrate care. Praise when used correctly, is a powerful tool which can help teacher candidates when encountering intellectual challenges, understanding effort, and handling setbacks (Dweck, 1999).

Hawkins & Heflin (2011) found the use of praise to be an underutilized and incorrectly implemented strategy. When providing praise, teacher educators should describe the specific desired behavior versus stating generic comments like “good job” as well as praising candidate’s accomplishment versus ability (Dean, Hubbell, Pitler & Stone, 2012). Teacher educators can use technology to exhibit academic care by complimenting students (Peske et al., 2001). Through avatars, points, and badges, *Class Dojo* enables teacher educators to praise and guide their candidates into desired behaviors (Hammons, Matherson, Wilson & Wright, 2013). Websites like *Kaizena* allow teacher educators to give oral comments with voice inflection, which are more personal than features such as Microsoft Word’s track changes. Because older students like collegiate teacher candidates typically prefer private praise (e.g., written notes), technology platforms provide the perfect venue for praise (Burnett, 2001; Hodgman, 2015). Teacher educators can encourage caring actions by giving praise notes or virtual ‘shout outs’ via class or school platforms like *Remind*, *Edmodo*, *Social Media #s*, or *ClassDojo*, which can further promote and enhance caring professional relationships.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The technologies listed in this article are possible powerful technology-fused options, which support setting up meaningful avenues of communication, modelling professional online presence and praising teacher candidates. Technology will continue to change and evolve over time positively changing the communication and instructional landscape amongst teacher educators and teacher candidates (Prather, 2011). Teacher educators will need to stay current with candidate usage of technology.

Boundaries, privacy, and miscommunication are clearly limitations. Texting teacher candidates is a slippery slope that many teacher educators are not willing to step upon. Recently some P-12 school districts have tried to pass policies to forbid faculty-student texting, so teacher educators should check with their institutions to see if this method of communication is a viable option. When using texting communication, clear guidelines and expectations must be reviewed in class and outlined for teacher candidates in the course syllabus (Bowen, 2012; Walker, 2016). Finally, when utilizing technology-fused communication tools, there is potential for misunderstandings so teacher educators need to do their best to implement netiquette, common sense, and personal judgment (Common Sense Media, 2012).

Technology tools may provide a platform to building academic care, but it is not the *only* way to care for teacher candidates. It is critical for teacher educators to determine whether or not technology will help meet or better meet the needs of building a teacher candidate-teacher educator relationship. Utilizing these suggestions increases accessibility which may be outside of some teacher educator’s comfort zone therefore, teacher educators must determine whether or not the selected technology is an effective tool for this part of their practice. Even if teacher educators do their best to integrate technology, caring relationships with teacher candidates will not instantaneously develop.

It should be noted, the teacher educator can use some, parts, or all of these suggestions in ways they deem appropriate for their educational setting. As Nodding (2005) noted, there is no single recipe for how to care. Certainly care is about establishing an individual relationship and not about following a specific list of steps. As with many aspects of education, it is not enough to simply implement the strategy or use the technology and see what happens. Instead, it is best to be pro-active and utilize technology's strengths to develop and maintain caring relationships (Schroeder et al., 2010). Little research is available in this area therefore; empirical research is recommended to test the author's suggestions. Future researchers should investigate the impact of technology-fused tools on the teacher educator-teacher candidate relationship qualitatively through interviews and/or quantitatively through surveys (Lunenberg et al., 2007; Prather, 2011).

Conclusion

It takes hard work and significant time to develop caring relationships with teacher candidates. Oftentimes, traditional methods of fostering powerful professional relationships fall short. By providing effective and comfortable avenues of communication through technology, modelling a professional online presence, and praising teacher candidates, teacher educators can help foster the teacher educator-teacher candidate relationship. Caring teacher educators who infuse technology in and out of the classroom help strengthen relationships by affording teacher candidates the opportunity to capitalize on learning and enhance communication in familiar "connected" environments (Crews & Stitt-Gohdes, 2012).

As technology usage continues to increase, it is vital for teacher educators to prepare teacher candidates to care in new ways enhanced by technology. Caring for others starts with the work of teacher educators in teacher preparation programs. I am asking teacher educators to rise to the challenge and utilize all types of technology to build, foster, and maintain caring relationships with teacher candidates. Developing high and explicit caring standards by setting up meaningful avenues of communication, modelling professional online presence, and praising teacher candidates are ways to encourage and demonstrate care.

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