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BRINGING C.A.R.E. TO THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Incorporating the element of care is important in creating a positive, online learning experience. This is even more true in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and students are reporting increased feelings of stress and isolation. Combining the ideas of humanized online learning, social presence, and care can help instructors to foster and nurture online learning communities. The author attempts to simplify itemized strategies instructors can employ to form the mnemonic device “C.A.R.E.” which stands for: Connection, Attention, Respect, and Energy.

Introduction

The onslaught of COVID-19 has brought online learning to the forefront like never before. Simultaneously, as many students face isolation, job insecurity, and other stressors, impact on mental health is unmistakable. According to recent surveys, 91% of students believe the COVID-19 pandemic has added stress and anxiety to their lives, while 58% percent of students say the pandemic has made them “very” or “extremely” worried about their mental health (Ciechalski et al., 2020; Anderson, 2020). What can online instructors do to help their students in this daunting digital landscape? One answer is simple: C.A.R.E.

Of course, the element of caring is essential in creating a positive, nurturing learning environment. The acronym C.A.R.E. seeks to itemize strategies which foster humanizing elements into the online environment. The acronym consists of four factors: Connection, Attention, Respect, and Energy. C.A.R.E. combines elements of social presence, humanized online learning (Packansky-Brock, 2020), and care. Even outside of COVID-19, when learners experience a high degree of these elements, they are more likely to: engage in higher order thinking (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), Actively participate in online discussions (Cui, Lockee, & Meng, 2013), refrain from dropping out of their classes (Bowers & Kumar, 2015), and be satisfied with their learning experience (Moallem, 2015).

#1: Connection

All online students crave connection and hope to be part of a community. Online practitioners are familiar with the aspect of the Community of Inquiry (COI) which joins together the three aspects of cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence. To help further create a student-centered environment, consider the following tips.

Be culturally responsive with your students by acknowledging, responding to, and celebrating

their culture. Being culturally responsive offers every student a welcome seat at the table and equitable access for all cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Packansky-Brock et. al., 2020). This could be done in a way by offering opportunities for students to self-disclose information about themselves in an introduction, or ask for their opinion on a topical issue based on their cultural perspective.

Connecting to the aforementioned topic of self-disclosure, teachers may also benefit from some degree of self-disclosure in an online environment. Humanistic principles tout “don’t be a robot” and what better way to seem more human than to self-disclose in an introduction or topical video conference? Additionally, instructors may benefit from being intentional about their language register. Choosing a formal, consultative, or casual register either in writing or spoken can completely change the temperature of your course.

#2: Attention

Students need attention now more than ever. As instructors, we try our very best to give authentic presence and attention to each of our students. However, this is sometimes not feasible or realistic given certain course loads or unexpected removal of caps. This section will highlight some time-saving ways to give attention.

Feedback is a requirement in any course, but consideration should be given for the manner in which the feedback is presented. Timely, respectful, and personalized feedback can be essential. If it is a very large class, use the student’s name to help validate their presence. Additionally, you may wish to utilize video or audio feedback to humanize the grading process. Paired with a rubric, multimedia feedback will help the student improve learning and increase student-teacher interactions.

Video conferences are now a norm for most online classes. However, students may still feel slightly uncomfortable speaking up in the web conference environment. How can you give attention to students who won’t speak up? Utilize smaller breakout rooms where students can discuss a problem in small groups and rotate around the rooms to see if anyone has questions. Additionally, engaging students in polling capabilities can help students feel attended to even if a whole-group scenario is overwhelming.

#3: Respect

Respect is required in any classroom. In the lens of humanized online learning, consider instead the aiming for mutual respect.

Clear expectations in an online course are important for successful learning. Protocols ensure the online community is kept on the same page and leads to more successful discussions and activities (Chen et. al. 2017). Expectations of a student may include: ensuring cameras are on during a video conference, meeting with the professor at least once for office hours, activity expectations clearly defined in a rubric, or professionalism expected in emails. In turn, the professor may include expectations of themselves such as: the specific hours or days you will check emails, a timeframe for delivering feedback on assignments, or ensuring clear

communication if there is a change in the syllabus. Additionally, overall course quality can help ensure clarity of expectations, so instructors should speak with their departments about the possibility of a Quality Matters or other quality course review.

Finally, the fostering of mutual respect should be partnered with the approach of flexibility. Both teachers and students are in uncharted waters. Being understanding of circumstance both from the teachers' and students' perspective can help to achieve respect and community now more than ever.

#4 Energy

Last, but certainly not least, is the concept of energy. This concept frames the idea of energy-conservation for instructors. These suggestions aim to save time while simultaneously helping to individualize the course experience for students.

In a face-to-face setting, teachers can ask questions in class to get an idea of student comprehension. In an online environment, this can be trickier, because short answer questions can lead to lengthy grading. So, instead of low-stakes assignments which are hand graded, consider switching to auto-graded quizzes or games to check understanding. Some excellent suggestions may be: H5P, Materia, or multiple choice questions which have automatic grading directly into your gradebook.

To save time communicating with students, consider setting up advance announcements to notify students of reminders for the coming week. Whatever can be set up in advance will keep everything on track and allow the instructor to spend more time on incidentals.

Rubrics are another tremendous energy saver for teachers. Including rubrics not only creates clarity for the students, but they also greatly reduce the cognitive load instructors need to engage to assess each student submission. Though often used for written submissions and discussions, rubrics can also be used for visual projects, oral presentations, group work assessments, or peer evaluation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the onslaught of COVID-19 has made humanization and care an urgent need in the online classroom. As the world changes, so must online learning. The acronym C.A.R.E. seeks to create a mnemonic device which can be used to remind instructors how they can employ these strategies in their classes and communities. Hopefully in time, the embracing of these principles will create a more humanized and caring online environment which continues far beyond the days of the pandemic.

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