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Perspectives on dialogue and care in teaching, learning relationships in an ever-changing online higher education landscape¹

Abstract

This article explores whether pedagogies of dialogue and care are evidenced in how lecturers engage online with their students in teaching and learning on Learning Management Systems (LMSes). Many lecturers in the online higher education landscape predominantly come from affluent educational habitus, whereas many students come from working-class backgrounds. Many students struggle with internet connectivity, the cost of mobile data, as well as software and hardware issues that prevent them from accessing quality tertiary education. The South African education and training system is unevenly distributed and has too many barriers to growth for many working-class students from an online learning perspective. All online higher education institutions are responsible for creating teaching and learning outcomes that are achievable for students, as well as empowering them to take part in their own learning, which ought to speak to how these institutions create dialogue and care for students. Moreover, a student's full potential as a person must also be developed when setting the content and standards on LMS platforms like Blackboard. A pedagogy of care as a holistic pedagogy emphasises the relationship between the lecturer and the student (social consciousness).

An interpretivist paradigm was employed in this study. Identified outcomes for the use of LMSes exploring staff's engagement with students through Blackboard were employed in a recent academic article based on a project done by the University of the Free State's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). From this quantitative document, an analysis was made by the researcher to sustain the following three broad themes. These include lending support to students participating in online teaching and learning, supporting students in building relationships on online teaching and learning platforms and the challenges faced by lecturers in caring for students in online teaching and learning.

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that social class plays an active role in the decision-making in the online teaching and learning process, as lecturers are the unwitting tools

¹ This article is the dissemination of a PhD entitled "Exploring deliberative democracy in the higher education online space: towards dialogical and caring pedagogies," under the supervision of Dr. C. Tsotetsi & Dr E. Barnett, Department of Education Foundations and Higher Education, Faculty of Education, Free State University.

of the ruling class. This is foregrounded in whether pedagogies of dialogue and care are evidenced in how lecturers engage online with students on LMS platforms such as Blackboard. Important observations are noted and can be summarised as follows: The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), if managed by online and higher education spaces, could potentially be a landscape where the nature of the relationship between lecturer and student is neither docile nor self-gratifying. Instead, such a relationship has the potential to be transformative because teaching and learning should empower working-class students to become successful graduates.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Fourth Industrial Revolution, higher education, Learning Management System, pedagogies of care, social capital, student engagement, student success, technology

1. Introduction

Despite the end of apartheid in 1994, severe socio-economic inequalities still persist in South Africa today. Nowhere is this more apparent than in education, where disadvantaged youth are not equipped with the skills they need to succeed in life. The challenge for educators at institutions of higher learning is to alleviate these inequalities as an essential foundation of pedagogies of care in order to turn our society around (Lawrence & Maphalala, 2021).

Coupled with this, higher education is faced with the following challenge:

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of students in different ways, depending not only on their level and course of study but also on the point they have reached in their programmes. Those coming to the end of one phase of their education and moving on to another, such as those transitioning from school to tertiary education, or from tertiary education to employment, face particular challenges. (Daniel, 2020: 92).

The onset of the pandemic resulted in a drastic increase in the use of online teaching and learning platforms among South African universities. Has this resulted in the engagement between student and lecturer becoming a richer, more positive relationship? In order to answer this question, this research will frame pedagogies of care within an online, blended teaching and learning environment to ascertain the engagement between lecturer and student – a relationship that is so often ignored in an online context. This is important because it is so critical for dialogue in order to address any inequalities that may exist in a post-pandemic environment.

Given that online higher education is often ‘faceless’, this research contends that the responsibility to offer a democratic space of care is limited and is largely the responsibility of the lecturer. The question is whether lecturers exercise this responsibility through dialogue and care, and if it is evidenced in how lecturers engage online with their students in teaching and learning on LMS platforms such as Blackboard. By implication, social class comes into play because of the huge impact social class has on the decisions lecturers make. However, it does not appear that lecturers engage adequately with their students in terms of social consciousness,² but rather are largely interested in achieving module and course outcomes (Mpungose & Khoza, 2022).

Noddings (1984: 113) posits that this kind of social connected awareness in the higher education space is difficult to “proximate ... under whose gaze I fall” if there is not a deliberate stance to create interactions and engagements. This includes lecturers being able to know

2 According to Pavlidis (2015: 1), social consciousness is: “consciousness in the sense of knowledge of the objective reality and consciousness in the sense of awareness of oneself as a subject in his/her social ties with other persons-subjects”.

their way around the LMS, such as Blackboard, and creating communities of engagement that support students' needs. This might have to happen in a stop-start manner because of the need for continuous evaluation which may prevent lecturers from fully utilising the digital tools at their disposal (Zawacki-Richter *et al.*, 2019).

Max Weber (2017) places this kind of transformation on the ontological locality of social class – it is a liminal space that has ethical implications. People who are closely associated with one another in terms of wealth, power and status tend to stick together. This is also true of the lecturer-student relationship, while the reverse also applies. Where there is a mismatch between lecturer and student, misunderstandings and problems arise, not just in terms of social consciousness, but also in terms of technological challenges (Ditaunyane, 2008). It is therefore crucial that it is never assumed that caring takes place in online higher education (Pietersen, 2023). This is what this research problematises and there is real apprehension for opponents. For example, Selwyn (2019: 16) surmises that:

... as with digital technologies in general, digital data do not offer a neat technical fix to education dilemmas – no matter how compelling the output might be.

Moreover, the same claim is made by Sabiha and Oualid (2022: 127), who write:

... the higher education sector had not experienced remarkable development in terms of digitalisation, except for a few activities in a few sectors such as health, industry and services that have experienced a gradual evolution to new information and communication technologies.

In a country like South Africa, one needs to consider the big gaps between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in society, particularly concerning data and technology (Lembani *et al.*, 2020). From a Marxist perspective, people can be separated into the working (proletariat) class, middle (bourgeoisie) class, and upper classes. These distinctions cause much conflict to arise – the poor fighting for equality for all, while the rich fight to maintain their prestigious position within society. This throws the interaction between 4IR, students, lecturers and tertiary education off balance as the sociological conflict theory plays itself out. The online relationship between lecturer and student is important to frame through this lens, because "caregiving and the related moral element of competence refers to ensuring that the care required or needed by the person being cared for, is met" (Feldman, 2020: 13).

This article discusses how dialogue and care are evidenced in how lecturers engage online with their students in teaching and learning on digital platforms. This discussion includes their pedagogy of engagement through examining their teaching values, abilities and equitable distribution of resources when using an LMS to create a secure and welcoming learning environment. The prospect of offering pupils a learning environment that motivates them to become engaged citizens is also covered in the article. Moving from the literature review, the themes of class stratification in relation to higher education and the evaluation of measures to boost online engagement will also be explored.

The interpretivist underpinnings employed in this study explore whether pedagogies of dialogue and care are evidenced in student and lecturer relationships in the online education LMS space. The paper will then go on to detail how dialogue and care are suggested from an instructional online teaching and learning perspective before arriving at some conclusions.

2. Literature review

If online higher education is constructed around the lecturer-student relationship (social consciousness) and not just technology, then the value proposition for a pedagogy of care as a holistic pedagogy has the potential to usher students towards active citizenry. This idea is important for its contribution to deliberative democracy in higher education and online spaces in order to foster inclusive learning environments for students where dialogical and compassionate pedagogies from a South African perspective are prioritised.

2.1 Location of class stratification in relation to teaching and learning

Even though class stratification is unjust, it can nevertheless be seen in how dialogue and care are displayed by lecturers in their online engagement with students. Ignoring the habitus³ in the students' working-class background, any 'building blocks' thereafter may result in challenges with the 4IR environment, which consequently could diminish care in online learning platforms. It has previously been stated what impact was made through the UFS's CTL project (Pietersen, 2022:4). It showed that with the relevant role-players, mostly lecturers, dialogue and care are critical in the teaching and learning process. Tronto (2017: 32) poignantly describes this phenomenon as follows:

... all humans are vulnerable and fragile, some more so than others, and ... all humans are at some point in their lives vulnerable, which requires them to rely on others for care and support. Humans are both recipients and givers of care, although a person's capacity and need for care shifts and changes throughout life.

Where human vulnerability and fragility exists, stratification exists, and where stratification exists, conflict is sure to arise. However, one's location and rank can change according to individual achievements, even though class is still strongly determined by one's social background (Anderson & Taylor, 2006: 211-228). This creates an uneven balance of power in the teaching and learning relationship between students and lecturers. Even though social class is predetermined, it is the factor in society which matters significantly and can be challenged, allowing deliberative, caring education that is inclusive and based on dialogue to take place.

Engagement of this kind may not matter immediately to lecturers in the online teaching and learning space. However, it is concerning that many lecturers are oblivious to the "phantom" power they wield that determines social class (Feldman, 2020: 12). This has the potential to directly influence lecturers' decisions negatively – including decisions to engage with students from diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. However, if these decisions to engage with students are executed well, the use of 4IR technology in online higher education and the care for students may yield long-lasting positive results. The question then becomes: What connection do lecturers have beyond clever technology to enhance the teaching and learning experience in order to send the signal that caring is taking place?

3 According to Navarro (2006: 16) who succinctly summarises Bourdieu, habitus can be defined as "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them". This definition has been referred to throughout the article.

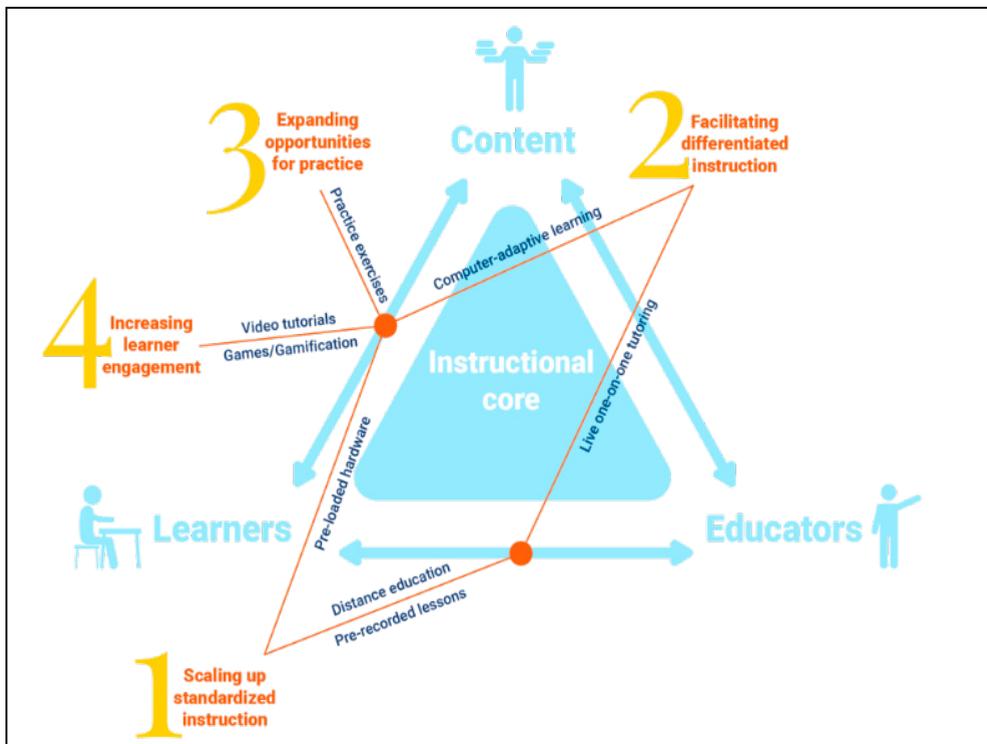


Figure 2: Connections⁴ that need consideration for pedagogies of care

The above infographic, adapted by Cohen and Ball (1999), shows how e-learning can be differentiated to make it more meaningful for students. The first stage shows how learning is standardised, such as pre-recorded lessons in the case of distance education. The second stage features an increasing level of differentiation to suit the needs of students, such as one-on-one online tutoring. In the third stage, more opportunities are found for students to practise their newly-gained knowledge through practice exercises. This can be further enhanced in the fourth stage through video tutorials and games, which in turn enhance learner engagement further.

Pedagogies of care necessitate thorough acknowledgement and engagement with students by lecturers. They are confronted with a choice: to favour their own social class or that of the students they teach. Students flourish when the lecturer’s instruction allows them to engage with the content in various ways. However, this can only be achieved when lecturers move beyond standardised education and offer their students differentiated, expanding opportunities to learn – thus facilitating a pedagogy of care for the student’s whole being.

If we look at online higher institutions, it can be argued that most lecturers come from a more affluent educational background (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). In contrast, most students being taught are mostly from working-class backgrounds (Bunt, 2021: 4-5). Students in online higher education find themselves bound to their lecturers’ educational habitus and all their

⁴ See this diagram, adapted by Cohen and Ball (1999), from <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/realizing-the-promise-how-can-education-technology-improve-learning-for-all/>

disconnecting traditions and cultures, but they make the best of it. These subtle factors shape and add character to the students' lives. They are also filtered through the use of an LSM, which can offer these minor but necessary traits in delivering a satisfying student experience.

Offering students a quality education is a choice and unfortunately this kind of choice is often predetermined by social class (Hlatshwayo, 2021). If students belong to the same class as their lecturer (usually upper class), they have a wider scope of prior knowledge to tap into and, as a result, receive a better pedagogy of care (Pausigere, 2016: 43-45). Lecturers should take their duty of care to their students very seriously, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds with whom they have less in common. This is particularly true in an online setting where many lecturers fail to care adequately for their students' needs.

Two social factors can be seen as the driving force behind decision-making in society, i.e. agency and structure. According to Marx (1973), the structure of the capitalist economy takes precedence over human action or agency. This is debatable, but looking at this statement, one needs to realise that Karl Marx was a sociologist who based most of his work on capitalism. If one thinks logically about the two concepts (agency and structure), observe whenever one makes a decision, there is the question: Was it a free choice or was it in a manner structured by social class or social structure? Tronto (2016b: 6) notes:

What caring democracy equalises, then, are not acts of caregiving, but responsibilities for care – and as a prerequisite, the discussions about how those responsibilities are being allocated ... and assuring that everyone can participate in those allocations of care as completely as possible.

This kind of caring democracy directs lecturers to acknowledge that middle-class students and lecturers have more cultural and social capital to seek out and interpret information in an online education landscape. This determines the best criteria to achieve the module outcomes. Therefore, not only is information relevant, but it is also faculty preference as far as teaching and learning are concerned. Working-class students have no choice but to spend the majority of their time assimilating the habitus of their lecturers, because middle-class lecturers always teach with a long-term-orientated strategy in mind (Avram & Dronkers, 2005). This means that online teaching and learning may result in a series of undesirable effects, such as conflict. Social mobility within the class system is also an inherent quality where this teaching approach is concerned. When one considers the middle class, the people who fall under this group are those who aspire to stay in the middle class and secure their prestigious position.

Therefore, class stratification in relation to online higher education is important to interrogate within a diverse education space, because it communicates the potential effect of dialogue and care. For class systems to stay the same, or for individuals to progress upwards is something that lecturers have the unique power to influence. Thus, if students are asked to interact online on an LMS, it should be in such a way that they feel protected and genuinely cared for. Lecturers need to make a concerted effort to understand students as whole persons before they can enable them to perform well in technologically advanced spaces (Long *et al.*, 2022).

Of course, there are those who oppose the idea of acknowledging habitus and doing something to address inequality in higher education. They argue that in order to give greater care to students, lecturers need only lean into technology. However, these opponents should

consider the views of Charles Taylor in his *Politics of Recognition*. In it, he writes sublimely on how social recognition lends authenticity to human identity:⁵

... our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being (Taylor, 2021).

Taylor's theory extends to a multicultural society where all are equal and tolerant of one another and have equal access to resources in order to thrive. Unfortunately, contrary to Taylor's utopian vision, not all things are equal in South Africa because of our colonial past (Maigari, 2021: 187-189). Not all students are able to access higher education; not many students have access to technology; not many lecturers are open to engagement on these issues. According to a teaching and learning document by the UFS CTL (Pillay, Sibeko & Witten, 2021), most students are first-generation students (in other words, neither of their parents attended university); 61% are the first individual in their family to attend university; 7% have a mother that attended university and 3% a father; and almost 20% have had either a brother or sister attend university before them. The support and care given to students are crucial, as a high percentage of students are first generation, especially at the UFS. These students have little or no family collegiate history and may enter the university with limited knowledge about the jargon, traditions and patterns of behaviour expected of them (Pillay, Sibeko & Witten, 2021). These are all factors that are embedded inequalities and speak to a lack of resources and access that moves beyond the narrative of equal distribution. Notwithstanding this, Taylor's thesis implies that a multicultural recognition requires a redistribution of resources, such as greater access to technology and resources, particularly in education, because higher education is still largely reserved for the advantaged. If a pedagogy of care is set against this backdrop, conditions will become far more favourable and an enabling environment for students to succeed will be created (Feldman, 2018).

2.2 Measures to engage teaching and learning stakeholders

To evaluate the quality of online higher education, measures need to be put in place to re-evaluate teaching and learning. It is important to tap into this "action-reflection" process. This process lays bare how students participate positively and actively on a virtual platform like Blackboard, where the stories of students and who they are as persons from different backgrounds lend richness to the teaching and learning process (Longo, 2020: 1-2). This ultimately allows all stakeholders in the teaching and learning process to strengthen and modify their practices (Davids & Waghid, 2018: 221). This is where Freire's theory may help to support the pedagogy of care because he is deeply aware of habitus when it comes to education, particularly religious education. This is an approach that encourages a reflective process in which both lecturers and students are able to value the cultural and historical sources of individuals. Davids and Waghid (2018) refer to this as "active citizenry". These ideas are important for the contribution to deliberative democracy in higher education and online spaces in order to foster inclusive learning environments for students where dialogical and compassionate pedagogies in a South African setting are prioritised.

⁵ This research not only supports the belief that education should affirm students' cultural identity, but also that it should examine habitus from a social justice viewpoint.

To put this within a theological or philosophical framework, it is prudent to borrow again from the words of Habermas (2002: 149) who, when asked his opinion on his love for education, replied:

For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk.

In the above statement, Habermas (2002: 149) accentuates that any ethos, including any theological and religious ethos, ought to embrace education. More importantly, critical, dialogical and deliberative higher education, including on online platforms, ought to be foregrounded in a pedagogy of care. Through open communication and debate, students and lecturers should arrive together at a better rationality for the community. Communication must be constant in teaching and learning, an integration and inclusion of cultures and religion, so that everyone understands and can learn from one another. Without communication, rationality and common good are impossible (Ruga, 2014: 11).

The aforementioned views necessitate an educational ethic of care and are undergirded by inclusion in order to dictate a fair action and redress in the teaching and learning process. This means true transformation on online platforms such as Blackboard can indeed take place. This is described by Freire (2018), noting that

reflection and action in close interaction are the necessary conditions for dialogical action and if one of them is prevented, the word becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action (Freire, 2018: 87).

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in this study is interpretivist by nature because, according to Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2014), the interpretative framework strives for a sophisticated circumstantial and reflective approach that centres on how people form meanings. This kind of meaning making will help to enhance our understanding of whether dialogue and care are evidenced in how lecturers engage online with their students in teaching and learning on LMS platforms such as Blackboard

3.1 Culture-related capital capacity in online higher education

Inclination and capacity involve the extent to which lecturers are inclined to be engaged with the choice of technological teaching and learning advances as determined by social class. Its constructs need to be revaluated to ensure that dialogue and care are evidenced in how lecturers engage with students in the online higher education space. If a lecturer has a higher inclination, this implies that he or she possesses a certain belief about, for example, how they prefer engaging with students on an online learning platform (Feldman, 2020: 3). According to Tooley (1997), this can be expressed in terms of cultural capacity. "Cultural capital capacity includes having knowledge about familiarity with the education system, self-confidence, and

stamina – to research, visit schools, make multiple applications and decisions about the schools of choice” (Tooley, 1997: 217-230). This in turn strongly influences the choices that are made for the education of working-class students so that, in the course of education and quality online higher education in particular, the working class feels that it owns its own social constructs.

The different lived experiences of working-class students and middle-class lecturers would mean that they come to different conclusions based on their differing social backgrounds. Social class distinction and inequality in South Africa remain problems in our society. Apartheid has left deep scars and these wounds are ready to burst open due to the tension which exists between the different races and culture groups. The curriculum and lecturers’ identities add to the disparity exacerbated by apartheid in a sphere such as education (Davids, 2018). The past has had a major influence on how working-class students fare in online higher education today.

The relationship between student and lecturer and how they relate and collaborate in the teaching and learning process need to be carefully considered, especially if the power wielded by lecturers is greater than that of the students. The attempt to achieve this can be summarised by Greene (1986: 430) when she asserts “[teaching and learning is] joined to a justice or equity process”. This process ought to prompt students and lecturers to question meanings and ideas, to imagine alternative possibilities and outcomes, to modify practical judgements and to develop respect and critical engagement in their fields of study. In this way, critical assignation and deliberation are unhindered communicative liberty that involves both rational opinion and wilful allowance of information, which can almost always potentially lead to a transformation in people’s preferences and perceptions of their learning (Adams & Waghid, 2005: 28).

3.2 Online learning and higher education: the role of care and dialogue

It is important to both contextualise and clarify the origin of the research problem. The historical situatedness of how higher education institutions operated in the past and only catered for the needs of a few also falls within the ambit of evaluating whether proper care and dialogue takes place in institutions of learning today. Higher education and online education spaces are perhaps unwittingly contributing to an unevenly distributed education and training system that has too many barriers to growth. This is because they do not prioritise the voice of students in relation to creating dialogue and care for students to feel included. It is, accordingly, the researcher’s conviction that quality education ought to be evenly distributed and should be available to all South African students, regardless of background or location. Therefore, education entities need to set equitable teaching and learning standards for every student, but they also have the responsibility to create teaching and learning outcomes that are achievable in their process of “becoming” and a means to empower students to be part of their learning process. Additionally, when setting the content and standards for online teaching and learning programmes such as Blackboard, it should be kept in mind that all students need to be developed in reaching their full potential as persons, not just for academic accolades (Bloch, 2005: 9).

Factors that sustain excellent dialogical outcomes include valuing the views of students in the Learning Management Systems (LMS)⁶ process, particularly when it comes to indigenous

6 Blackboard is the Learning Management System (LMS) that the University of the Free State make use of. It has been used in this study to investigate whether it fosters online engagement between students and lecturers or not.

knowledge, as it forms part of their educational formation. This signals to students that education spaces do value dialogue and care. If this is done well, students will feel that they are included to create depth and meaning to their studies. In doing so, institutions would have wholly developed students who are engaged both globally and locally, and will not be restricted by geographical borders (Bloch, 2005: 10). Ultimately, higher education institutions would have instilled in their students an appreciation of care and dialogue, a key attribute in their future workplaces.

This discourse does not allow the possibility for any individual or group of students to be excluded from critical, dialogical and deliberative educational matters that interest them and that determine their future. After all, the rights of students to participate in deliberation and dialogical engagement are legally institutionalised and should be measured against the effective use of teaching and learning tools, such as Blackboard. This means that each individual student has an equal opportunity to be heard during the deliberative and dialogical process, which in turn means that the viewpoints of the minority are heard, and the domination of the majority is subdued. However, for dialogical engagement and deliberation to be effective and truly beneficial, certain crucial aspects constantly need to be monitored by the lecturer in order to create pedagogies of care for students (Bloch, 2005: 10).

4. Research methodology

Against the above theoretical framework, an interpretivist paradigm has been applied to this investigation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). This means that data retrieved from participants came from UFS CTL documents based on a project previously done, which now forms part of the policy formation documents that govern the online teaching and learning space. This was considered from varied interpretive points of view and not just one single perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The interpretivist theory was framed against qualitative research done by the CTL and highlighted and analysed in this study, to reflect on whether lecturers exercised their responsibility of dispensing dialogue and care in their online classrooms, and if it is evidenced in how lecturers engage online with their students in teaching and learning on LMS platforms, such as Blackboard. What this research therefore aims to point out is that technological platforms ought to be used to benefit the education system on a broader level, extending a notion of care and engagement to purposeful action. This speaks to the epistemological concerns with the kind of dialogue and care experienced in online higher education, together with discussions into deliberative democratic tenants of online teaching and learning. In other words, students should be motivated to learn, because lecturers care for them as human beings and are genuinely interested in them as whole persons (Noddings, 2006: 341), beyond just the outcomes that are often expected in the online education environment.

5. Ethical considerations

This research adheres to the ethical standards of the University of Free State's GHREC Committee. This study falls within the category of low risk. For further clarification to this study, the ethical clearance number is UFS-HSD2022/0045/22 for further reference.

6. Findings and discussions

Exploring the adoption of technological platforms ought to be used to benefit the education system on a broader level to understand and impact the student using a pedagogy of care approach. The responsibility of lecturers should be reflected not only by how many students engage with class content, but also in the embodied cultural capital that students bring to online, face-to-face and hybrid learning spaces. This requires of lecturers to manage the online learning space carefully from a social equity and multicultural perspective (Pietersen, 2023). These ideas are important for the contribution to deliberative democracy in higher education in order to foster inclusive learning environments for students.

Tronto (2010a: 32) argues that the process “starts from the premise that everything exists in relation to other things ... and assumes that people, other beings and the environment are interdependent”. Thus, the researcher has categorised the findings from secondary data into broad themes, namely:

- Lending support to students to participate in online learning
- Supporting students in building authentic relationships on online learning platforms
- Challenges in caring for students online

The researcher has further elaborated under these three themes how the respondents (academic staff) gave credence to these categories.

6.1 Theme: Lending student support to participate in online teaching and learning engagements

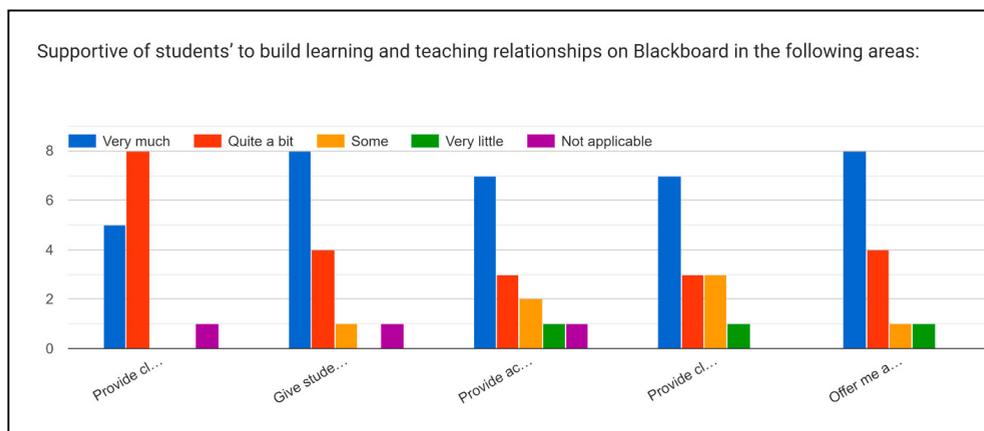


Figure 3: Support to build online teaching and learning spaces

According to this graph from the SEP-TLF Report (2021)⁷ and Pietersen (2022), the majority of academic respondents were in a position to lend active support when they engaged with students online. This included affording students the opportunity to do well in their studies by giving active feedback online and providing clarity where there was confusion about the subject matter. From the above graph, it can be seen that most lecturers “very much” supported their students in meeting their needs (the blue bar) or at least were willing to do “quite a bit” to help

⁷ See report, available online https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/inline-files/SEP-TLF_Report.pdf

them when they needed support. Few lecturers admitted to doing “very little” (the green bar) to help their students during the COVID-era of exclusive online learning. Questions reflected in the graph are spelled out below, and the following had to be ticked *very much*, *quite a bit*, *some*, *very little* and not *applicable*:

- Provide clear learning outcomes or objectives
- Give students access to content that is relevant to the learning outcomes
- Provide activities which encourage me to engage with the content critically
- Provide clear instructions and use a level of language that was easy for me
- Offer me an opportunity for feedback on the tests and assignments

What the graph indirectly shows is that students need to take control of their own learning in a process known as self-directed or active learning (Gqokonqana, Olarewaju & Cloete, 2022). It shows that there exists some level of care and engagement beyond just performing on advanced online technological platforms. This approach of support is critical in an online teaching and learning environment.

6.2 Theme: Building teaching and learning relationships on online teaching and learning platforms

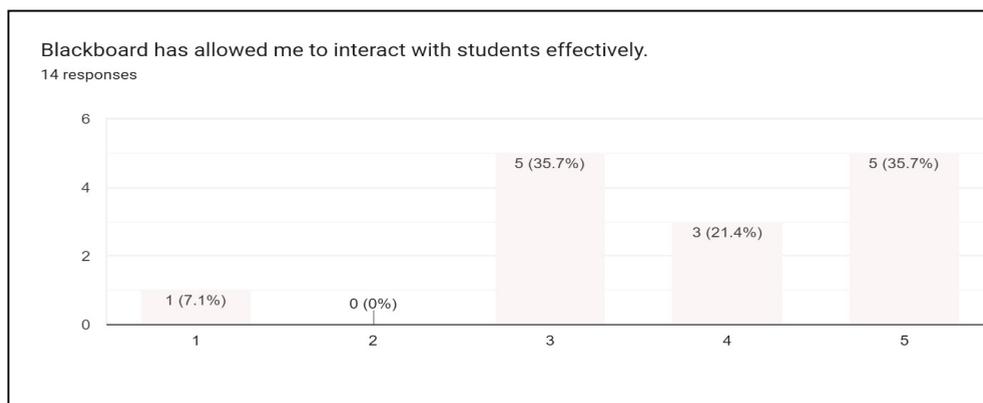


Figure 4: Technology as a means of engagement

According to the above figure, most respondents (93%) agreed that the LMS platform Blackboard had allowed them to interact with students effectively, with most agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Only one person strongly disagreed, feeling that Blackboard had not helped him to engage effectively with his students.

Due to the national lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, tertiary students were forced to go online. Most classes at the UFS were taught via Blackboard as an LMS. This graph may not be a true reflection of the level of interaction between lecturer and student because much of the online teaching that occurred during the lockdown was necessitated by emergency measures and, as a result, not much real interaction occurred. In other words, technology was more the focal point, while the caring relationship between lecturers and students was largely neglected. This is highlighted by a recent study, *Platformisation of*

Education: An Analysis of South African Universities' Learning Management Systems, in the following way:

In South Africa, the 2020/2021 academic calendar has begun amid the pandemic as educational institutions were confronted with the urgent need to improve their modes of online curriculums and course navigation, online examinations, increase student inclusion for remote learning and strengthen their capacity for ICT solutions in the time of crises (Badaru & Adu, 2022: 67).

This speaks to this research's core focus, which is that the same advances in technology that were made during the pandemic where no face-to-face engagements were allowed also became a stumbling block for many in terms of prioritising caring relationships with their students beyond curriculum, grades and technological outcomes.

6.3 Theme: Challenges in caring for students in online teaching and learning strategies

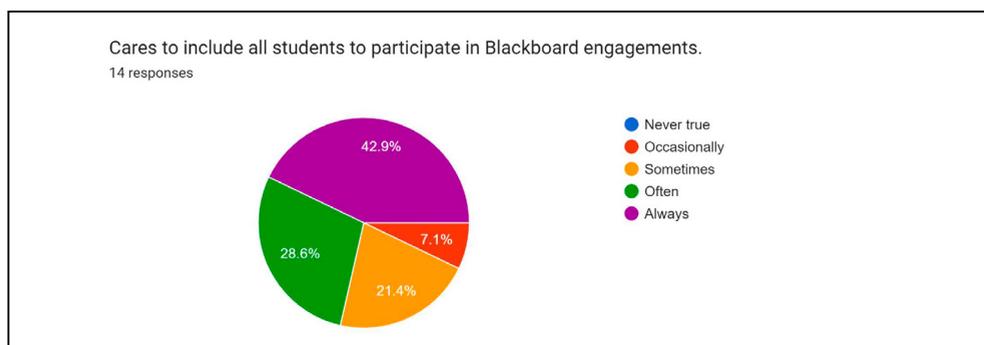


Figure 5: Caring attitudes in online teaching and learning spaces

The general view of respondents, as illustrated by this graph, was that most lecturers did their best to include as many students as possible in their Blackboard lessons. Almost 43% of lecturers who were surveyed said that they “always” encouraged student participation (the purple portion of the pie chart), while the majority said that they “often” or “sometimes” did so (29% and 21%, respectively, as represented by the green and yellow slices of the pie chart). Only 7% were brave enough to admit that they only “occasionally” sought to include as many students as possible in their online teaching.

No doubt this result was influenced not only by the challenge of students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggling to come to grips with the technology, but also by the fact that lecturers perceived caring in a very narrow sense as simply the percentage of students who attended virtual classes. Academic staff found it hard to interpret caring by means of descriptive course input on learning platforms (Makina, 2022: 35). Rather, they perceived care by viewing the frequency and percentages of students attending lectures and handing in assignments on time. The definition of care should have been expanded to suggest more than achieving outcomes on Blackboard. It should have required of lecturers to inspire motivation in their students – the kind of motivation that maintains engagement and participation, which includes conscious (what we see) and unconscious (what we hear and feel) behaviour (Bekele, 2010). Deliberate caring on the part of lecturers involves being investing in students' success and keeping up forward momentum in the teaching and learning process.

7. Conclusion

This research explored how pedagogies of dialogue and care can influence how lecturers engage online with their students on LMS platforms, such as Blackboard. Aligned with this aim, it has also established that social stratification and how lecturers choose to acknowledge their cultural background can affect how students feel about being cared for and listened to. It may help lecturers to move towards affecting positive change in the life of students and instil traits in them which will impactfully pave a path in their lives (Pietersen, 2023). With regard to social constructs, students need to feel that their social habitus, which includes 'invisible' morals and respect for others in society, as well as their own being, is adequately acknowledged by lecturers. These ideas are important for the contribution to deliberative democracy in online higher education in order to foster inclusive learning environments for students.

To transform online higher education to become a socially just environment, lecturers need to adopt pedagogies of care towards their students. This article has established that social class plays an active role in decision-making in the online teaching and learning process, as lecturers are often unwittingly the tools of the ruling class (Pietersen, 2023). The 4IR, if not managed properly, could become an environment which perpetuates, rather than challenges, the status quo and provides a disservice to disadvantaged students wanting to leapfrog the restrictions that apartheid placed on them. Academics at the University of the Free State would do well to re-read its motto: "... leading learning and teaching, focused research, and impactful engagement with society. Situated in the heart of South Africa, our character of caring and diversity translates into an outstanding university experience" (UFS Website, 2022). A pedagogy of care is implied in this statement and therefore creating an online learning environment for higher education institutions like this is non-negotiable. Rather than just tapping into the one-dimensional technological advances required in a 4IR higher education space, this philosophy needs to be part of an ongoing praxis in order to attain deliberate relational engagement which enables students to be truly successful and impactful in society.

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