

Editorial

What Completes an Excellent Teacher? Care in Higher Education English Language Teaching

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According to French and O’Leary (2017, p. 1), in the higher education context, the idea of “teaching excellence” emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and “has slowly grown in importance” since. Teaching excellence is of course important, if only because pragmatically it can increase “student recruitment” for the institution of higher education concerned (French & O’Leary, 2017, p. 2). Despite its importance, however, defining teaching excellence is not a simple matter. There has been no consensus on what teaching excellence constitutes and it often depends on the criteria formulated by a particular higher education institute, which may be used to evaluate candidates applying for teaching excellence awards (Gakhal, 2018). For example, the criteria for teaching excellence upheld by the National University of Singapore are (Centre for Development of Teaching & Learning, NUS, n.d.):

1. Thoughtful design and use of pedagogical approaches to teach subject knowledge in or across disciplines.
2. Enhancing student learning, student engagement and/or the overall student experience.
3. Fit-for-purpose assessments that advance educational goals and promote higher-order thinking.
4. Effective feedback strategies to motivate and support students’ learning and growth.
5. Creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment.
6. Demonstrating leadership through envisioning change and sharing the achievement for wider adoption, thereby enhancing the practice of colleagues within the department, and wherever possible more broadly in the faculty, school, or the wider NUS community.

By contrast, the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence of the Pennsylvania State University (2022) includes “subject matter expert” and “excellent communicator” in what they consider attributes of an excellent teacher. These two attributes seem to be absent from the NUS’s criteria presented above, or at least they are not explicitly stated.

Surveying the literature, Williams et al. (2021) report that authors have similarly offered different definitions to explain teaching excellence. Williams et al. (2021) further highlight that “there is a general lack of agreement on the definition of teaching excellence” but consider that teaching excellence could variedly be discussed in three areas: in the “political, social and educational” context, from the “student perspective” and from the “teacher’s perspective” (Williams, Pricop, Heron, Balloo, & Barnett, 2021, p. 2). In the political, social and educational context, teaching excellence is linked to the use of technology and teaching activities. From the student perspective, it has to do with concerted effort, engagement, the breaking down of student and teacher barriers, and support. According to various authors cited by Williams et al. (2021, p. 3), from the teacher’s perspective, it includes energy, enthusiasm, effort, a close relationship between teaching and research, and even the courage to be “vulnerable”. I refer the interested reader to Williams et al. (2021) for a brief literature review of the diverse definitions of teaching excellence.

The purpose of this introduction is not to discuss the diverse interpretations of teaching excellence or to criticize any party for their particular foci in defining teaching excellence, but to draw the reader's attention to the curious observation that when educators discuss teaching excellence and its criteria, they seem to place little or no emphasis on care, at least not explicitly. Care seems to be something that is largely outside of teaching. After all, most or all universities presumably have counselling services to support the mental health of students, so faculty members may see care as something that is incidental to their teaching. It is not something that they need to be overly concerned about. When they come across a student who needs care, the teacher could quickly refer them to the university's counselling service, and subsequently focus their attention on their teaching duties with the rest of the class.

It is in fact documented that "the place of care in university teaching and learning has received relatively little attention in higher education (HE) literature" (Anderson, et al., 2020, p. 2). Similarly, it is said, "When it comes to higher education, the focus in teaching has traditionally been centered on content area expertise" (Barrow, 2015, p. 45). When educators discuss curricula, they might focus on skills that prepare students for the workforce in the 21st century, such as "expert thinking and complex communication skills", "critical thinking", "collaboration", "creativity", and IT skills, which include "searching for" and "citing information" (Chu, Reynolds, Tavares, Notari, & Lee, 2017, pp. 17, 21). The implementation of "twenty-first century skill education" (Chu, Reynolds, Tavares, Notari, & Lee, 2017, p. 18) does not seem to require care. When educators write about teaching goals to meet student learning objectives, how odd it would sound if an educator presented something like this as a teaching goal: "a learning process that is minimally traumatic and maximally stress free because of the teacher's care". Then, when it is time for students to evaluate their teachers, how ridiculous it might appear if one of the official evaluation criteria for the teacher was a "capacity to love" (Freire, 2005, p. 5).

Further, as far as I can remember, of all the educational talks by educators that I have attended, most, if not all, were about methods and approaches, not care. They could be about, for example, the benefits of peer review, feedback practices, CLIL ('content and language integrated learning') and multimodality in the classroom, but rarely about care. A talk on care is usually delivered by a representative from the university's counselling service. Similarly, in any hiring process, the search team might ask questions on anything from the candidate's experience or expertise in course design, material development, student engagement, online-teaching, educational technology, reflective teaching, research, personal development but, again, rarely on the capacity to care for students.

The idea of care was, until recently, new to me too. For a long time, as a university writing teacher, I was fixated on how to methodologically develop writing skills in my students and unleash their potential to make them better writers. I kept recalling how my primary 3 nephew, when guided, could solve primary 6 algebraic problems. I was convinced that every student had potential that was limited by the syllabus, and I wanted to remove learning barriers. My teaching goals were thus narrowly but relentlessly focused on improving and maximizing student performance. Thus, I felt a sense of achievement when my undergraduate students managed to develop their papers into full-length research papers for publication (Tao & Wong, 2020; Yee & Wong, 2021). I felt a sense of success when [a former student of mine won an international writing competition](#). However, at that time, I did not realize the full implications of what I was doing. Then one day, my teaching philosophy was challenged when a colleague asked me point blank, "What are you doing about the weaker students?" Embarrassingly, the question caught me off guard and I could not give him a satisfactory answer. The colleague's reminder subsequently made me reflect and question more deeply my teaching practices at that time.

For years, guided by a teaching objective to maximize achievement in students, I created a teaching design that assigned more work than is expected in an undergraduate writing course. Consequently, some students found my learning tasks demanding, challenging, and overwhelming. In fact, students told me that my course was well-known for being challenging, which implied that some students had pre-conceived notions about it before they started. Ironically, that kind of feedback convinced me that I was

on the right track and drove me further in the direction I was heading. It did not immediately raise my awareness of the need to care for students. Even during the thick of the pandemic, my first priority was to be an adept online teacher (Wong, 2020), not a caring teacher.

The fact seems to be that the importance of care in education literature is “not a new idea” (O’Brien, 2010, p. 114). Noddings (2012), for example, advocates an ethic of care, while Freire (2005, p. 5), a “capacity to love”, without which “it is impossible to teach”. Scholars have said that good teachers “care about students” (Anderson, et al., 2020, p. 11) and “progressive” educators love them (Freire, 2005, p. 74), at least “the learner in each of them” (Rodgers, 2020, p. 38). More recently, a study by Felten and Lambert (2020, p. 17) uncovers the guiding principle that “every student must experience genuine welcome and deep care”, which is endorsed by Wood and Su (2021). Commenting on the importance of this principle, Felten and Lambert (2020, p. 17) says:

All students need to understand that they are valued as people. This is prerequisite for their belief that they belong on campus, which is essential for persistence and academic success.

Felten and Lambert thus link care with academic success. They are not the only ones. Barrow’s experience tells her about “the powerful impact” that caring relationships “can have on the human spirit and how they can lead to success inside and outside academe” (Barrow, 2015, p. 46). O’Brien contends that educators “must attend solicitously to caring in [their] work with college students in order to maximize student learning” (O’Brien, 2010, p. 114). Barrow cites a number of sources that suggest that “students succeed at a higher rate and become productive learners in environments where teachers demonstrate their care about and for their students” (Barrow, 2015, p. 15).

The importance of care in higher education cannot thus be overstated. I support Wood and Su (2021, p. 131) as they call on educators to “renew [their] understandings of teaching excellence” and consider care as part of the post-pandemic “new normal”. The good news is that caring for students does not have to be something out of the ordinary. A teacher could begin by listening, being more attentive and empathetic to their students (Barrow, 2015; Noddings, 2012). They could be “readily available” to their students, be open and “kind” to them (O’Brien, 2010, p. 111). However, O’Brien takes a further step to show care by inviting her new students to “stop by” her office at the beginning of every semester to talk to her one-on-one for 15 minutes just so that she could get to know them individually (O’Brien, 2010, p. 112). The activity proved to be popular and, at the end of the first semester that she did it, O’Brien’s students commented very positively on the activity, citing it as evidence of her “caring” (O’Brien, 2010, p. 112).

Following the colleague’s reminder and advice from literature, it became obvious to me that care should ideally underlie all teaching practices. Unfortunately at that time, I could not claim to have a sound understanding of what care in higher education is about. Furthermore, I wanted to raise awareness of this notion. I subsequently issued a call for papers for a special issue in the International Journal of TESOL Studies on care in higher education English language teaching. The result is a collection of five papers from several countries: USA, Ecuador, Japan and Singapore. The following five paragraphs briefly introduce the authors and summarize the papers.

Cortney Holles’ research interest lies in faculty-student interaction and well-being for both students and faculty. In her paper, Holles presents some of the findings in her Doctor of Education research that was conducted in an American university, showing that faculty and students influence each other’s well-being. On the basis of the findings, Holles offers suggestions on pedagogical and curricular change to support students. She also advocates for institutional support for all faculty, especially those who do care work inside and outside of the institution. Holles’ study is revelatory, because it shows that care flows in two directions, top-down from the administration to faculty and then to students, and in the opposite direction, but she argues that the responsibility to support well-being flows from the top down to students.

The paper by Simon Pryor, Matthew Diaz and Mike Ruddick, who are ELT practitioners in Japan, draws our attention to students with special education needs (SEN). Their study investigates teacher and

peer group attitudes towards SEN students in Japan, and the obstacles in learning that these students face. Their findings suggest that there are indeed barriers to learning for SEN students, including those imposed by the administration. However, the silver lining is that the study finds positive aspects to peer and student-teacher interaction. The authors recommend SEN training for teachers. This paper is important because it reminds us of a particularly vulnerable group of students whose needs and, in fact, existence we teachers often overlook.

Jhonny Villafuerte, Éder Intriago-Palacios and Antonieta Morales-Jaramillo explore best practices in caring for students in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in an Ecuadorian university. The findings show that students were affected by the pandemic in various ways, needed care from their teachers, and appreciated it when care was given to them. From the perspective of students, care could be shown simply by providing comprehensive explanations on complex topics, detailed feedback on student work, and flexibility in giving time off when students need to attend important personal events. This paper is valuable in that the authors offer a host of useful recommendations for teachers to implement care.

In her reflective study, Nadya Patel, who teaches in a Singapore university, advocates relational pedagogy, which emphasizes the building of relationship between individuals in the teaching and learning process. Patel shows that relational pedagogy could be implemented through the use of empathetic interactions when communicating with students and through empathetic concern. She demonstrates that the cognitive construct of empathetic interactions could be woven as intellectual empathy into classroom discourse, and how, as a result, students could feel cared for, supported, and their struggles acknowledged. Patel's paper could serve as a guide for teachers who wish to embed empathy in their classroom instructions.

Cherise Teo, a teacher trainer in another Singapore university, reflects on her experience caring for students and how she has developed herself in this area over the years. In her dispensing of care in the highly competitive Singapore education landscape, Teo now considers three things, the positioning of herself as the teacher to the students, the negotiation of student needs, and pedagogic design for student well-being. This means that Teo does not teach mechanically. Instead, she creates a safe and flexible learning environment for her students. Her student feedback shows that she is on the right track. Teo additionally presents suggestions on how to create a safe and flexible classroom environment.

In the conclusion to this introduction, I must clarify that care is not the solution to every pedagogic challenge (Wong, 2023), but educators who believe in teaching excellence cannot continue to teach without care. If the pandemic has shown us educators anything, it is the importance of care. I now argue that an excellent teacher is not complete without the capacity to care. When a teacher cares, they pass the value of care to their students, who can in turn care for their teachers. I now recommend that we newly recognize care as an important criterion of teaching excellence and, for that matter, a 21st century skill.

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Jock Wong teaches at the Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore. His teaching and research interests include semantics, pragmatics, and academic communication. He believes in maximizing every student's potential but argues that it could not be achieved without an additional element of care. Care is the support that every student needs to overcome challenges in their learning. Through care, every student will know that the teacher is behind them all the way. Jock thus believes that every excellent teacher and 21st century educator must subscribe to an ethic of care and that, alongside knowledge and skills, the value of care is what they need to consciously pass on to their students.