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Building a caring HyFlex pedagogy: An example of practice in an initial teacher education program

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Abstract

In our Australian regional communities, equity of participation and parity of access to initial teacher education courses have been a long-standing issue. Developing a caring HyFlex pedagogy that positions interpersonal and collegial relationships as central to the teaching and learning process and addresses the tyranny of distance is core to integrating technology and enhancing interaction to overcome barriers within regional communities. This example of practice provides the perspectives of a tutor and a student to illustrate the role of care and technology in building a student's learning journey. Pairing pedagogical care with a hybrid and flexible (HyFlex) delivery model presents an opportunity for an innovative regional pedagogy that makes a unique contribution to the established literature about both caring and HyFlex technology implementations.

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Introduction

Conceptualising and implementing educational technology should occur through collaborative and constructive educational experiences (Garrison, 2016). Yet in regional education contexts, technology is often considered in a utilitarian way to conquer distances or resourcing issues (Beatty, 2019) with subsequent technology implementations heavily focused on 'transmission of content' (Garrison, 2016). In this paper, we present a work-in-progress example of higher education practice for delivering initial teacher education (ITE) programs at an outer regional campus of an Australian university. (According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), the remoteness structure defines remoteness areas for the purpose of releasing and analysing statistics. Remoteness areas divide Australia into five classes of remoteness which are characterised by a measure of relative geographic access to services.) We illustrate how coming from a place of care and kindness informed the selection and implementation of educational technology and delivery models of a professional experience placement course that is mandatory for program completion and graduate teacher registration.

The ITE program and course deliveries at the outer regional campus encompass diverse geographic, contextual, and digital footprints. Students enrolled in the ITE program reside in regional towns and communities, some being a few minutes' drive from the campus while others being hundreds of kilometres away in remote locations. For the students, this generates a significant cognitive load whilst managing the pressure and demands of their studies. In addition, the cost of fuel and little to no income during their compulsory pre-service placements (between six and eight weeks) is a significant financial burden to already geo-economically vulnerable students.

Engaging and supporting students in this context requires more than just a transactional teacher-student relationship. It also requires care. Motta and Bennett (2018) describe the importance of intentionally interrogating this concept as a way of "foregrounding the centrality of caring work, and its potential to play a wider role in reinvigorating democratising Higher Education (HE) pedagogical practices" (p. 363). This provided a conceptual starting point or 'affective turn' for the pedagogy of care enacted in the regional ITE program delivery to critically consider pedagogy in the locationally specific context and how this is situated within the broader and holistic sense of education as a relational dynamic.

While the phrase *educational technology* (EdTech) does not conjure images of care, often technology is positioned as a necessity or practical tool to achieve a specific outcome (Beatty, 2019). However, in this example of practice, the selection and application of technology was in the context of care being central to the teaching and learning process. In this pedagogy of care, e-learning as either online or blended learning (Garrison, 2016) was transcended through the development of a hybrid and flexible (HyFlex) model, where students were provided with the option of attending classes on campus or online (or both). Equivalent HyFlex course structures, first described in 2006 (Beatty, 2019), gained prominence during the pandemic to allow for

education to continue in response to the necessity of social distancing (Beatty, 2020). However, in this case, the course delivery team came to their caring HyFlex structure without formal knowledge of the model. Rather, their intent was to build trusting and caring communication within genuine, reciprocated relationships between students and their tutors while establishing a learning environment.

In this paper, we present both the tutor and student perspective of a caring HyFlex pedagogy using the affordances of the University provided technology to illustrate the role of care and technology in building a student learning journey. We conduct an analysis of the example of practice with a specific focus on the three forms of 'presence' as described in Garrison's (2016) Community of Inquiry (CoI) model and demonstrate the potential for improved agency of choice for students and the promotion of affective and embodied praxis in the delivery of regional ITE courses leading to a more positive and effective learning experience. Further, we offer insights into the development of the HyFlex approach and how the development and implementation of the model have been accelerated through academic and professional collaboration. We conclude with reflection and recommendations for further research with a view to the development, codification, and scaling of a regional pedagogy for ITE programs.

In the current study, the application of technology is situated through a human(e) or caring framework as part of a pedagogy of care. The strategies described are part of a deliberate and targeted approach to ensure equity of access for regional students. The concept of care in an education context is part of the contemporary debate about access and widening participation in higher education (Motta & Bennett, 2018). In the positioning of this paper, we highlight the potential for using care as a starting point in the consideration of educational technologies, identifying a potential knowledge gap within the field of ITE.

Theoretical underpinnings

The example of practice is theoretically guided by three frameworks. The first one is Garrison's Community of Inquiry model (CoI), which provides a framework for understanding e-learning in higher education (Garrison, 2016). The second one is the HyFlex model, initially described by Brian Beatty who is a Professor of Instructional Design and Technology in the Department of Equity, Leadership Studies, and Instructional Technologies at San Francisco State University in 2006 (Beatty, 2019). Thirdly, these are enhanced through the concept of a pedagogy of care, informed by the work of Motta and Bennett (2018).

Community of inquiry

Garrison's (2016) CoI model focuses on the specific elements which are essential for a meaningful educational experience. He describes the framework as involving the learning unfolding within the community through the interaction of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, 2016). Figure 1 shows a simplified version of the

Col model, where the overlapping elements focus on the engagement with participants (students), content, goals and direction building into an educational experience through a supporting discourse, climate setting, and regulation of learning. These elements play a pivotal role in fostering productive and meaningful learning experiences in diverse higher education settings while embracing and nurturing the humane aspect of education.

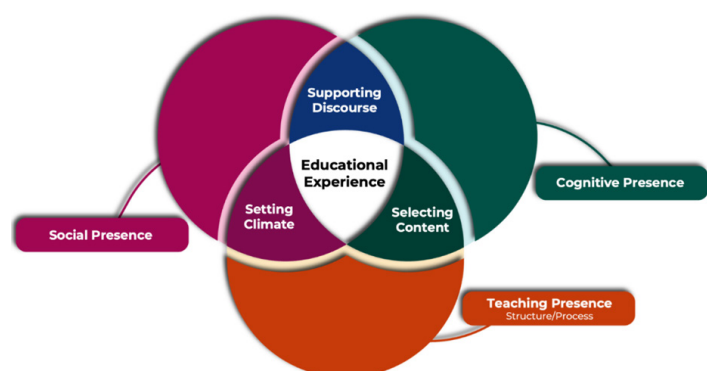


Figure 1. The Community of Inquiry (Col) framework (Garrison, 2016).

The Col model has been widely used as a theoretical framework due to the focus on the student and relationships as opposed to the technology in e-learning. While not a systematic review, some examples include the application of the Col model to individual courses (see Stafford, 2022) and to the teacher's point of view (see Kamali et al., 2024) as well as to entire subjects (see Zhang et al., 2023). The challenge of removing the focus of technology from e-learning is best illustrated by good practice examples that focus on the non-technology components of e-learning (e.g., TELAS and Quality Matters). Garrison's (2016) Col model allows the application in e-learning, regardless of the educational technology utilised, with the goal that "sound educational principles must inevitably guide the implementation of these innovations if we are to realize (sic) meaningful and worthwhile learning experiences and outcomes" (p. 10).

This has relevance to our example of practice as the focus is not on the technology components of the caring HyFlex but rather the connection to the educational experience for the students as they build trusting and caring communication within genuine kindness and reciprocated relationships. The approach to educational technology implementation is not focussed on the technology nor the imperative to connect across distances. The example of practice starts from the relationships. Therefore, using the Col as a theoretical framework provides insights into the caring HyFlex that are outside of a focus on technology.

HyFlex model

In his Col framework, Garrison (2016) describes e-learning as either online or blended learning. However, the HyFlex model is more than either model. It is a hybrid model that combines face-to-face with online learning and allows students the option to attend sessions in the classroom, online, or both and swap between modes (Beatty, 2019, 2020;

Educause, 2010). While the concept of HyFlex was introduced in 2006, it has gained popularity through the pandemic for educational continuity and then post-pandemic to allow for student flexibility (Beatty, 2019; Calonge et al., 2024).

Similar to the Col model, Beatty (2019) does not focus on the technology of HyFlex but rather describes four values: Learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility. Therefore, the model is open to interpretation and application. HyFlex and technology-driven approaches play a crucial role in reducing educational inequalities, making learning more inclusive and accessible (Escudeiro et al., 2023). The HyFlex model has been applied in different ways across different institutions, with extensive lists of examples emerging (see Beatty, 2019; Raes et al., 2020).

The HyFlex model is not without pedagogical and technological challenges. From a student perspective, they are required to negotiate additional technology and self-discipline making for challenges in the learning environment (Raes et al., 2020). From the teacher's perspective, this includes technology management while building a learning environment that requires additional coordination from the teacher to manage multiple class environments (Raes et al., 2020). The implementation of a HyFlex method is accelerated when the institution has the technology in place (Educause, 2010). However, it requires consideration of the room, spaces, and technologies to best engage students who are significant and prone to issues due to that they study from a different location (especially in regional areas) (Beatty, 2019; Educause, 2010; Raes et al., 2020). Besides, there are other organisational factors that can enhance the HyFlex mode, including administrative systems, policies, and practices (Beatty, 2019).

Significant to the example of practice is the addition of care or caring into the HyFlex model. In the online environment hosting his book, Beatty (2019) continues to add examples of case studies of the HyFlex models. At the time of writing, there are 17 examples of implementations of HyFlex models. However, in those examples, there is no explicit mention of 'care' or 'caring' in any of them, nor is there mention in the systematic review produced by Raes et al. (2020). That is not to say that the examples and case studies do not come from a place of care. Rather, none include a reference to the inclusion of care in their description. Therefore, the inclusion of care into the caring HyFlex has the potential to make a unique contribution to the current literature on the model.

The pedagogy of care

The intentional foregrounding of care presents the potential for reinvigorating higher education pedagogical practices (Motta & Bennett, 2018). Motta and Bennett (2018) identify three themes to consider in care: "care as recognition, care as dialogic relationality, and care as affective and embodied praxis" (p. 363), and it is through these themes that relationships are shown to be central to enacting a pedagogy of care. Similarly, Aspland and Fox (2022) consider Garrison's concept of presence in the student-teacher relationship, highlighting the centrality of kindness, suggesting that "[t]o become a kind teacher involves more

than just a teaching tool" (p. 146).

Embracing a pedagogy of care positions interpersonal and collegial relationships as central to the teaching and learning process. Knowing our students as people and as learners, within and beyond the context of the learning space or location, significantly deepens the work of academic learning and the lived experience of enacted classroom practice (Motta & Bennett, 2018; Seary & Willans, 2020). Supporting this position, Tan (2022) suggests, "we are not just teachers and students" (p. 156), and it is our humanity and relationships that connect us and add value to the teaching and learning experience. Reciprocated relationships that are genuinely compassionate mean "we must know our students, and they must know us" (Tan, 2022, p. 157) in a transformative and intentional way.

When students' experiences and insights are shared and valued, both the dialogic relationality and emotion of the reciprocated relationships add depth to the shared experience, create a positive learning environment, and enhance the meaning-making processes (Tan, 2022). Walker and Gleaves (2016) characterise this positive and enabling practice of teaching and learning as "the active fostering of and maintenance of pedagogic relationships above all else" (p. 1). Plust et al. (2021) build upon this, stating that "[c]aring appears to be a perceptible manifestation of authenticity" (p. 314). Teachers who care about the subjects they teach, their students, and themselves transfer their passion for the profession.

Noddings' care theory, as outlined by Burke et al. (2012), Motta and Bennett's (2018) pedagogy of care, and Tan's (2022) focus on the human(e) elements of genuine and compassionate relationships emphasise that care goes beyond teaching, requiring individuals to perceive and receive caring actions. The tutor's recognition of students' individuality stresses the importance of an individualised approach, through dialogic relationality, recognition, and affective and embodied praxis (Burke et al., 2012; Motta & Bennett, 2018; Tan, 2022). This results in a positive student-teacher relationship and reciprocated kindness, showcasing the benefit of a pedagogy of care.

Background to the example of practice

The University's outer regional campus is located approximately 385 kilometres from a state-government capital city and 1,400 km from Canberra – the national capital city of Australia. Travelling from there to campus via road, car, or bus involves approximately a 4-hour and 25-minute drive via the National Highway, as indicated in Google Maps.

The embodied reality of this journey includes sharing a single-lane highway with cars, caravans, motor homes, buses, and interstate transport trucks, without mentioning some transporting double or triple trailers totalling more than 30 metres in length. In addition, the level of concentration needed to journey safely is a careful watch for wildlife (particularly kangaroos). Convenience and rest breaks are essential. What a straightforward 4-hour and

25-minute drive looks like on Google Maps is a demanding and sometimes tedious 6-hour journey. Students will travel from remote and very remote locations to attend classes on campus located in the outer regional area, and there is additional travel for their mandatory professional experience placements. Attending placements require them to commute long distances or relocate living arrangements to complete. In our example of practice, less than half of the students lived locally, with the remainder travelling from communities up to 250 km away. An extreme instance is that one student travelled up to 120 km return each day of her 40-day placement.

Since the introduction of the Bachelor of Education program in a regional campus in 2013 (Harvey & Walsh, 2018) and through the COVID-19 pandemic, these regionally delivered ITE programs continued mainly online as an external delivery option. Often, regional external students were supported by a metropolitan-based tutor with some pre-service placements supervised 'remotely' by phone or teleconference.

For students in these regional areas, there are also financial challenges, which prompt many to undertake concurrent work and study (Brosnan et al., 2023). As students increasingly opt for hybrid study-work approaches to their teaching careers and regional communities experience unmet demand for local or regionally attuned educators, regionally responsive pedagogies and educational technology designs become necessary.

Example of practice

In 2021-2022, academic staff from the selected university began to focus on the caring components of their teaching and learning practices, namely, a pedagogy of care. In early 2023, discussions with the Dean of Programs highlighted the intended benefits to ITE course and program delivery in the regions and promotion of student agency. The approach was recognised as innovative, and there was an opportunity to formalise, codify, and scale the model. The 'caring with technology utilisation', a way to connect externally through technology, had evolved into a caring HyFlex mode, a model granting flexibility between face-to-face and online options, ensuring the preservation of both teacher and cognitive presence without any negative repercussions (Garrison, 2016). The transition from 'caring with technology utilisation' to caring HyFlex was accelerated through the collaborative relationship between an academic and a professional staff member. It was through a recognition of care and shared commitment to addressing the educational challenges and navigating the intricacies of integrated technology to ensure students in regional areas could receive a high-quality education that a common interest was found. Taking both academic and professional services perspectives became an enabling factor in our example of practice.

The following example of practice is presented in a self-narrative manner from two perspectives: the tutor's (academic) and the students'. Understanding both the context and lived experience of the tutor and the student through self-narrative brings into focus "how lived life bears on lived educational experiences" (Hamilton et al., 2008,

p. 19). The tutor and the student come to the example of practice from different generational, geographic, and practitioner- inquirer perspectives. While both are early career researchers, the tutor has extensive practical knowledge of teaching, and the student is beginning her teaching career. Again, drawing on the work of Hamilton et al. (2008), ours “is a story of experience[s] that attempts to share information and learn from it” (p. 20).

The tutor’s perspective describes the importance of care in their practice and how this drove the implementation of technology to address regional delivery challenges in ITE programs. Prior to joining the University in early 2021, the tutor was a classroom teacher and school leader in regional schools for more than two decades. Knowing her students as people and learners and fostering relationships with her students, their families, and the broader community has always featured highly in her practice. The specific strategies and practices employed in the evolution of the HyFlex model were taken from her journal entries and reflections of practice throughout the 2023 academic year. Technological skills were developed in situ by the tutor.

The student’s perspective describes how her decision to relocate from a large metropolitan city to a regional area to finish her ITE degree and begin her teaching career was supported and enhanced by a pedagogy of care. In addition, the caring HyFlex delivery model provided agency of access to enable the multifaceted aspects of life, study, and career. The student’s description of her learning journey and the impact of the caring HyFlex is compiled from interview transcripts, personal notes, and reflections on the transition from pre-service to independent and autonomous teacher.

Building a pedagogy of care – A regional educator’s perspective

What really keeps me awake at night is thinking about the pressures and demands placed on our final year pre-service teachers as students and individuals with lives and commitments outside of university; and how, to a large degree, the success of their final placement hinges on the quality of the pedagogic relationships between the pre-service teachers and supervising teachers, school sites, and the connections with the university teacher (Jones & Foran, 2024, p. 407).

Living and working in regional communities is a joy and a privilege; it is not a deficit position. As a teacher of children and young people and curriculum leader in schools for more than two decades, equity of participation and parity of access to education for all regional students have been the focus of my work even before I became an academic, tutor, and early career researcher.

Largely, regional courses are prepared in the metropolitan context. Course coordinators develop the content for tutors to deliver, ensuring consistency for all students, regardless of their mode of engagement or geographic location. Metropolitan, regional, and external classes all have access to the same content via a Moodle-based platform – Learnonline

– and standardised tutor delivery is encouraged. As a regional tutor, it is my role to contextualise the content and structure the delivery to suit my class. This means preparing to engage with the content in multiple and simultaneous ways, which takes some planning and preparation.

Knowing my students and the diversity of our regional contexts is fundamental to this process, and I draw heavily upon my experience living and working in regional communities. Pedagogical care underpins my beliefs, actions, and commitment to regional teaching, learning, and research. Motta and Bennett (2018) describe how caring “pedagogical practice is manifested by teacher-commitment to embracing the whole student, and not reducing them to instrumentalist and homogenised careless motivations and aspirations” (p. 636). Knowing each student in our regional classes as students and as people with lives and lived experiences beyond the teaching and learning context, and them knowing me, gave them the confidence to provide constructive feedback and suggestions about how to improve the regional teaching and learning experience.

Finally, deeply listening to and reflecting upon my students’ feedback has helped me envision and articulate how applying and innovating with the available technology would promote agency and choice. Embracing a flexible model was one way to address the regionally and locationally specific challenges for every student, regardless of their geographic location.

Implementing a caring HyFlex – A regional educator’s perspective

When teaching ITE in a regionally located university, building positive relationships with students comes first and foremost. A genuine commitment to supporting students to navigate the complex demands of university requirements, study loads, paid work, and the demands of regional life – including driving long distances to and from university – comes from understanding the regional context (Green et al., 2020; Harrington et al., 2022).

When coming from a place of care, without huge confidence in my digital skills and no background in educational technology, my approach to the use of technology in classes developed quickly. My trust in the caring approach helped me overcome these concerns with the belief that any mistakes or errors would model mutual support when capabilities, technologies or infrastructure fail us.

At the start of each semester, I sent all students a recurring meeting maker and Zoom link and this ensured the class was scheduled in everyone’s calendar (including mine). Zoom is the ‘standard’ videoconference platform, but we used Teams, Facetime, SMS or even phone calls on speaker when the technology was not our ‘friend’.

Something we learnt very quickly was that while videoconference technology is a useful tool and quick to employ, we discovered that as a teaching tool, it was not enough on its own (Jones & Foran, 2024). This led to the introduction of the hybrid environment as we moved

to combine the face-to-face and online (synchronous) participants. We recorded, narrated and 'whiteboarded' our learning to ensure that those students participating (asynchronously) could engage with the recordings in a meaningful way. Thinking about how to best manage break-out groups and capture the rich discussions within them took trial and error to begin with because you cannot record them all.

We solved the problem of creating rich content for asynchronous students by ensuring that face-to-face class members had immediate access to Zoom, enabling us to flexibly group in-class participants with on-zoom ones for discussions. When we came together as a group, we shared key points, summarising our discussions, and 'whiteboarding' these in dot points. Those engaging asynchronously were able to access rich media and follow along through narrated content connected to the numbered slides, discussion summaries, and photos of whiteboards that were included with the link to the recording to the whole class. The unintended and welcome bonus was that this ensured we could all reflect and 'look back' and refresh our memories of how we engaged with the content.

Implementing a caring HyFlex model is not without its limitations. Enacting a caring HyFlex model of delivery has a lot of moving parts for a solo tutor. Delivering content, engaging students both in the classroom and online, providing cognitive commentary for asynchronous users, and managing videoconference functions are a juggling act. Unexpected technological issues and unstable internet connection interrupt access and engagement of and for students. Often, resolving this 'in the moment' is beyond the control and capacity of the student or tutor, and almost always impacts upon the teaching and learning experience.

Initially, there seemed like a lot of moving parts to keep track of, but it did not take long to become familiar with how to run and support the classes. We reached a point where our transitions between modes of delivery were (almost) seamless. I was not thinking about the technology; instead, I was thinking about how to build capacity through shared life and learning experiences in situ. Having the hybrid flexibility allowed my students to get the most out of our classes, regardless of how they accessed them. There was no need to plan for who was where, in class, on Zoom, listening along asynchronously, and so on. We just made sure all bases were covered, and everyone got what they needed.

A significant structural challenge was the false dichotomy of internal versus external class modes, which did not allow for a hybrid option. Until 2024, students only had the opportunity to choose an internal (on-campus) or external (online synchronous) class, with course coordinators determining if virtual classes would be made available. The caring HyFlex transcends the internal or external dichotomy, and in 2024, all professional experience regional placement courses for the program will be run this way.

Learning journey of a caring HyFlex model – A student's perspective

As a co-author of this paper and a member of the 2023 ITE student cohort, my learning journey in the outer regional town, 90 minutes away from the University campus, began with an email offering a \$7,000 AUD scholarship from Catholic education, paving the way for a teaching placement opportunity in regional South Australia. It enticed me, as I had recently met someone from that town while on a study tour months earlier.

My decision to relocate, driven by a desire to contribute to a small community, required careful consideration of accommodation, logistics, support, and the feasibility of online study. Inspired by my friend, I gained a profound understanding of the town's needs, transforming my perspective and prompting me to pursue a job opportunity with a Special Authority to Teach, which is the authority provided to an individual in exceptional circumstances by the Teachers Registration Board to teach at schools in South Australia which are unable to secure the services of a registered teacher (TRBSA, 2021).

As I considered this journey, it brought attention to the challenges and opportunities students face in regional education. I had the impression that my only option for study would be online and external; and if there was to be a lack of tutor presence and limited personal, face-to-face interactions, this added to my concerns. The turning point came when I reached out to my friend. They knew about my intention to relocate and encouraged me to reach out to their lecturer. I contacted the tutor and expressed my interest in attending classes and workshops in person, to be able to have a positive relationship and connection to the University. Assured of the engagement and care, I took the opportunity and moved to Port Augusta, a small coastal city in South Australia, approximately 300 km drive from the state's capital city, Adelaide.

My classes offered a flexible blend of online and in-person learning experiences, allowing me autonomy, control, and ownership over my educational path. Having the opportunity to participate in mixed online and in-person learning experiences allowed me to exercise higher levels of thinking and adapting to new environments and communities. I felt empowered. Using various digital channels, such as Zoom, SMS, phone calls or group chats on social media, to connect with my tutor and other students, allowed me to navigate a demanding lifestyle that combined learning and work, both in the school sector and at the university.

My educator's student-centred approach which addressed my academic needs while ensuring I felt genuinely acknowledged as an individual learner, helped me feel connected, especially when feeling isolated from friends and family in a new country town (Baeten et al., 2013; OECD, 2023). I faced challenges that, without support, would have led to increased burnout. After challenges with my final year placement, I felt feelings of shame and failure, which were resolved and talked over with my educator via phone call, while commuting to placement in the morning.

A great support was the frequent check-ins and emails, which regularly ended with the hashtag *#hereifyouneed*. Academic knowledge and support were consistently communicated through workshops, emails, and poster boards, as were directions and support to summarise and reinforce key learnings (O'Brien, 2023). This triad of strategies ensured I had all the necessary information to feel confident in my potential for success. It also modelled how I would like to 'pay it forward' and further enact this innovative, holistic way of teaching in my own practice.

An infographic of my learning journey is shown in Figure 2. The experience has provided me with a transformative realisation and influenced my teaching perspective, underscoring the significance of feeling cared for and a way to enact a positive, supportive, and meaningful learning experience. This experience has become invaluable as I believe that our academic training often falls short in addressing practical skills for building caring relationships (Banda & Reyes, 2022; Burke et al., 2012; Cells et al., 2023; Flower et al., 2017; Harrington et al., 2022).

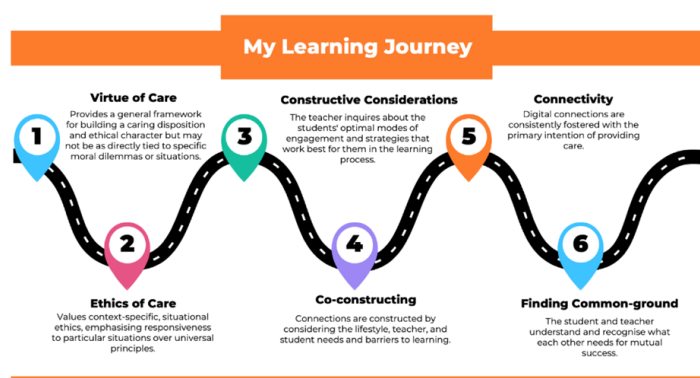


Figure 2. My learning journey (illustrated based on the student's description).

Discussion

The example of practice shows how coming from a caring approach has enriched the hybrid delivery, and there has been a positive impact on the student who was enrolled in the innovated program. While the caring HyFlex is in its infancy, our analysis of the example of practice demonstrates alignment to Garrison's (2016) Col model with elements of social, cognitive, and teaching presence all illustrated as informed by a pedagogy of care and inclusive approach (Motta & Bennett, 2018; OECD, 2023).

In addition, while the process of intentionally developing a pedagogy of care commenced in 2021-2022, the implementation of a caring HyFlex was accelerated in 2023. This was partly due to the pedagogy of care being well-established and a strong relationship between the students and their educator, enabling a HyFlex model to be implemented with existing University-provided technology (Beatty, 2020). It was also accelerated because it was implemented with a small cohort outside a formal learning design process with an enabling academic and professional relationship.

Noteworthy, the impact identified in the example of the practice is largely anecdotal and requires further investigation into the efficacy of the caring HyFlex. Therefore, it is important to explore this in more detail to consider how this could be scaled beyond a regional pedagogical practice that "connect[s] notions of place, space and identity at the local level" (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 89) to a caring HyFlex model that is applicable and transferable in any teaching and learning context.

Coming from a place of care

The regional educator's perspective illustrates what Banda and Reyes (2022) describe living and teaching within a community as "a caring ethic [that means] ... being present in the moment to craft pedagogies that are responsive to the particular needs of both the teacher *and* students" (p. 6). Flores and Alfaro (2022) support this position: "[p]racticing love and care in our classrooms and relations with others is a life learning process" (p. 393). Personal investment in the relationship amplifies the nuances, validating the commitment to care made by both the teacher and the student, fostering a learning environment that is inclusive and responsive to individual and collective well-being (Harrington et al., 2022; Pietersen, 2023).

This sense of belonging, of being seen, heard, and accepted as a "co-teach[er] offers community and collaboration that can sustain the holistic well-being" (Banda & Reyes, 2022, p. 2) of ITE students, their tutors, and the communities in which they live and work. Drawing upon the seminal work of Zeichner (2010), the regional tutor embraces a pedagogy of care that supports and fosters genuine, reciprocated, and non-hierarchical relationships (Green et al., 2020) with and for regionally located ITE students. Following Zeichner's (2010) lead, the tutor aims to drive a

shift in the epistemology of teacher education from a situation where academic knowledge is seen as the authoritative source of knowledge about teaching to one where different aspects of expertise that exist in schools and communities are brought into teacher education and coexist on a more equal plane with academic knowledge (Zeichner, 2010, p. 95).

The concept of recognition, dialogic relationality, and affective and embodied practice holds immense importance in cultivating a sense of belonging within the learning community and contributing to improved student retention (Harrington et al., 2022).

This relational approach bridges the gap between connection and community, as Garrison (2016) describes: "[C]ommunity is built with purpose, collaboration and trust" (p. 11). While the Col model was not applied intentionally, it is still present, as illustrated in Figure 3. The social element was clear: a) through the care for people shown in the intent for students to communicate openly in a trusting environment (social presence); b) within the context of the learning environment built from care and trust (cognitive presence); and c) the care in teaching in the design, facilitation, and instructions provided (teaching presence).



Figure 3. How Col was built through a model of care.

Utilising a caring HyFlex model and the technological tools that connect and engage students and their tutor draws upon the work of Kent and Taylor (2002) to give deeper insight into Motta and Bennett's (2018) exploration of dialogic relationality and the emotion of learning. The "five dialogic principles [of] mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment" capture the essence of dialogue in our context that "requires of participants that they take the good of others to heart when interacting" (Lane & Kent, 2018, p. 63). Enacting teaching and learning through a caring HyFlex model invites both the student and the tutor to be active participants in the experience. This builds and fosters reciprocated trust, care and dialogic relationality that underpins the relationships upon which a pedagogy of care is built.

In 2024, the caring HyFlex model will underpin ITE program delivery. The continued formalisation of our regional pedagogical practice has commenced with a view to codification and scaling. Sharing the example of practice provides opportunities for other educators to replicate the approach.

Measuring the impact on students

When coming from a place of care, it is of paramount importance to acknowledge students' life experiences and the insights they bring with them into the learning environment (Seary & Willans, 2020). The student's narrative of their learning journey shows the positive effects of the caring HyFlex. The utilisation of technology not only instilled flexibility and adaptability but also proved essential for the dynamic demands of the evolving educational and professional setting. This approach meets the challenge of developing new approaches to using the technology that "support new and more effective collaborative approaches to learning that engage learners in purposeful and meaningful discourse" (Garrison, 2016, p. 22).

The components of the Col model are present in the narrative, as depicted in Figure 4, where social presence is evident through feelings of trust and strong connection with the choice of communication. The cognitive presence was described through descriptions of acknowledgement and trust to build a supporting learning environment. Teaching presence was felt through a conversational relationship where meaningful academic and social conversations were

able to influence an active student role and learning identity.



Figure 4. How Col was experienced from a student's perspective.

The reflection on the student's experience brings to light the observation that academic training often neglects practical aspects of building meaningful relationships (Motta & Bennett, 2018). The student's commitment to emulate the tutor's supportive and student-centred approach underscores the significance of interpersonal skills and mentorship in the caring HyFlex outside of meeting prescribed learning outcomes. This commitment drives the student's dedication to positively contribute to the learning journeys of future teachers and students (Burke et al., 2012; Motta & Bennett, 2018). This presents an opportunity to consider the evaluation of the caring hybrid approach beyond the achievement of learning objectives.

Anecdotal feedback from the 2023 cohort of ITE students suggests that they are embracing the caring HyFlex model of delivery. Students indicated that this innovative approach keeps them connected to their regional peers and tutors while they work in schools and complete their ITE degree. The caring HyFlex offers the flexibility and connectivity of 'real learning opportunities' for this cohort as they cross the bridge from students and pre-service teachers to the 'work engaged learning' of beginning and early career teachers (Nagy & Robinson, 2013).

Despite the fact that this research is still in progress, preliminary findings suggest a pedagogy of care which embraces a HyFlex delivery model promoting student agency and choice to attend classes on campus, via synchronous video-conference software, or asynchronously through the recorded sessions, leads to regional students feeling more "involved" and "heard" throughout their courses. Thus, there is a need for further research to continue to validate our initial findings with a view to demonstrating its efficacy.

Showcasing a caring HyFlex

Beatty (2019) describes that the common impetus for HyFlex is resourcing. When he piloted the model, Beatty "sought solutions to the problem of needing to serve regional students with online and classroom options that allowed maximum student choice in participation mode" (p. 10). This is similar to the abovementioned example of practice, with the difference that our example comes from a place, which is explicitly about care. The caring drove the technology

selection and implementation.

With 20 years in education and no formal background in digital education or learning design, the educator/s implemented a caring HyFlex approach, which is consistent with the HyFlex values (Beatty, 2019) and aligned it with the Col model (Garrison, 2016). This illustrates the possibilities which Garrison (2016) describes “[A] collaborative educational experience demands the experience and insight of reflective, flexible and knowledgeable educators to translate principles and guidelines to the ever-changing contingencies and exigencies of their particular environments” (p. 6). While the Col model was not intentionally used, there is a clear connection to the model, as seen in Figure 5.

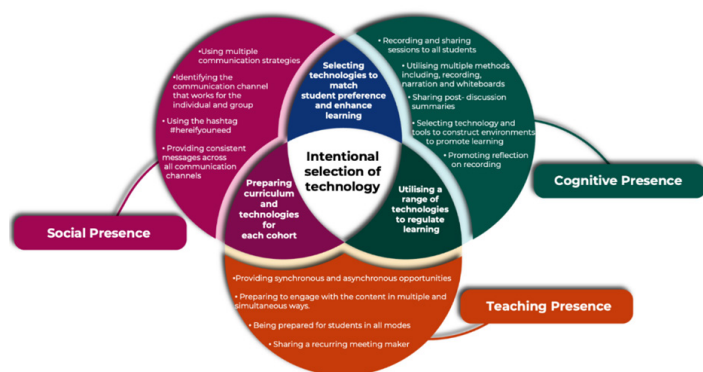


Figure 5. How Col components are seen in technology implementation.

The rethinking of social presence was shown in the selection of technologies to match the student preferences and enhance learning, including personalisation of communication around a common message and the use of hashtags when communicating. The development of a learning environment ensured that students could access the content and engage in multiple ways, showing the cognitive components. Finally, the teaching presence was clear with the tutor preparing to engage with the content in multiple and simultaneous ways.

From a constructivist approach, the nurturing and maintenance of connections necessary to facilitate continual learning (see Siemens, 2004) is illustrated by the adaption of technology and interventions to better meet student needs. This approach to HyFlex is consistent with the development of other HyFlex environments (Beatty, 2019). The shift from video conference to hybrid class evolved to accommodate students who were unable to attend class. Initially, the Zoom link was sent 'in the moment' as it was needed. "[C]onnections [were] created with others, real-time collaboration [took] place, and the power of a just-in-time learning atmosphere [was enabled] ..." (Utecht & Keller, 2019, p. 115). This transitioned into a consistent approach of including the Zoom link with the calendar request to offer flexibility for all students. The outcome was that: a) the class was able to nurture and maintain connections and facilitate continual learning, and b) no one missed out because they could not be there in person.

What could have begun as a technological fix to a geographical challenge was instead an intentional caring strategy and an iterative approach based on a dialogic

relational approach. This is due to the pedagogy of care.

A pedagogy of care is a deep and genuine commitment to relationships that are central to the teaching and learning process. When applying the educational technology in their classes, rather than coming from a learning design approach, the team came from a place of caring. Utecht and Keller (2019, p. 107) expand on this, stating:

The power lies not in the technology platforms themselves but in the connections they foster. Educators in both the K-12 and university classrooms who take risks and embrace these connected learning technologies have potential to uncover a whole new way of learning.

Technology was a tool to enable connections between students and their tutors, actively constructing new pedagogical knowledge.

A critical review of the regional tutor's approach shows an interesting approach to the design of the learning experience and the application of technology. Often, curriculum development utilises the University's provided infrastructure or is intentionally developed with learning designers. This sees the building of a learning environment from a theoretical or evidence base. However, in this case, it comes from an intuitive perspective, where the tutor used the technology that they felt was best to be utilised to further the pedagogy of care. This is counter to the evidence-based approach that is frequently espoused to improve the impact of digital technologies.

When talking about the Practical Inquiry (PI) model, Garrison (2016) tells us that concepts related to intuition and insight should not be ignored, which is the approach that followed the critical and reflective enquiry as the tutor learnt through on-the-run development of the caring HyFlex. However, this is not consistent with Neelen and Kirschner (2020), who argue that "no matter how we slice it, what it comes down to is: We need to use the evidence available to us to make sure we move beyond opinions and intuition" (p. 1). Given that there is a significant tension between acknowledging a learning process and the way learning design is approached, it is an area which may benefit from further research.

Considering the possibilities

Academic and teaching work is situated in an organisational context of administrative or professional services. In an e-learning context, Garrison (2016) raises non-teaching issues of policy, leadership, infrastructure, and curriculum development. In a HyFlex learning context, Beatty (2019) raises issues of time and facilities. However, there are other realities of university life in the form of professional services, including timetabling and workload.

One of the unique features of the example of practice is the relationship between the academic and professional staff, which also came from a place of care. The lead researcher is an academic with an ITE background and a focus on the pedagogy of care. The second researcher has a background

in digital education and currently holds a professional position. As their relationship grew, so did their sharing of complementary interests. They built a dialogic relationship of care and collegiality, which supported and enabled the regional tutor. As an example of caring as affective and embodied praxis, it was through this relationship that the unique nature of the caring HyFlex model was recognised and identified as a potential area for collaboration and research.

From a practical perspective, the 'professional services' of the academic unit were identified as enablers to the scaling of the regional pedagogical practice from which the caring HyFlex model evolved. Providing linkages to technical services, ICT support, timetabling, and workload has seen support for the model through the lobbying for additional technology infrastructure, recognising the need for alternative timetabling processes and reflecting this into the workload model. While these are part of the academic unit core support services, they were not initially flexible to the regional pedagogical practice until the caring HyFlex model was explored in a collaborative way.

Fostering collaborative relationships between academic and professional staff is a key enabler for the implementation of effective higher education and assessment. The caring and productive academic and professional relationship illustrates the opportunities to explore alternative ways of working, where teaching and learning 'services' work hand in hand with academic staff. Furthermore, there is potential to explore, beyond the organisational enabling factors into the emerging research, into third space staff.

Third space staff are defined as those who "exist in a working space that occurs between academic and professional practice, research and teaching, and sometimes operate amongst the spheres in academia, practice and industry ecosystems" (Hains-Wesson & Rahman, 2023). The possibility for third space staff who sit outside of the traditional areas of learning design to play an enabling role. Therefore, we suggest that this is an area that may warrant further investigation.

Conclusion

In the paper, we reiterate that "our educational ideals must drive the vision" (Garrison, 2016, p. 6). We also illustrate how the inclusion of care can add value to educational ideals and support the implementation of learning technologies with the possibility of increasing the impact on our students. We believe the experience of our regionally delivered ITE programs builds and promotes reciprocated relationships and professional collaboration between educators and students that respond to and shape the future of regional education (Garrison, 2016).

We are just starting our research. After an initial concept was presented at the National Regional conference to good feedback, Vacation Research Scholars have been funded to support the research into the caring HyFlex and the deliberate and targeted approach to equity of access for regional students. Building upon our preliminary work,

the continued formalisation of a caring HyFlex in regional ITE delivery has commenced with a view to codification and scaling, building upon the collegiality of care between the two researchers. The relationship across academic and professional boundaries has enabled conversations about 'how do we do this/make this work', which has started to extend across the academic unit. Therefore, to be considered a modern approach to higher education, this model requires comprehensive research to demonstrate its impact on both students and educators, thereby informing educational practices.

In this paper, we suggest that developing a regional pedagogy that positions interpersonal and collegial relationships as central to the teaching and learning process and addresses the tyranny of distance is core to integrating technology and enhancing interaction to overcome barriers within regional communities. The false dichotomy presented to students of on-campus or online exposes the room to create an alternative which affords students agency of access promoting regional connectivity with peers, tutors, and educators in schools. The integration of pedagogical care with a HyFlex delivery model represents a novel approach that enhances the regional pedagogy and adds a distinctive contribution to the academic discourse on both caring and HyFlex technology implementations.

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