Making emergency remote teaching strategies through a pedagogy of care

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted key inequities in education, including disparities in technology access, student engagement, and emotional well-being, while simultaneously presenting opportunities for pedagogical innovation. This article explores how the shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) challenged traditional educational practices and provided a platform for reimagining learning environments through the lens of a pedagogy of care. Drawing from Noddings' (1984) framework of modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, as well as the principles of humanizing pedagogy and social constructivism, the article describes implementing care-centered strategies during ERT, such as flexible deadlines, reflective assignments, and intentional relationship-building. These practices addressed the intellectual, emotional, and social needs of students during a time of crisis and have become a foundation for sustainable teaching approaches in post-pandemic contexts. The article examines the challenges and innovations of ERT, offering actionable strategies for embedding care into higher education classrooms and advocating for institutional policies that prioritize equity, well-being, and adaptability. By sustaining these practices, educators can transform their classrooms into inclusive, compassionate spaces that foster resilience and human connection.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed critical limitations in educational access and accessibility worldwide, creating an urgent need to reimagine learning spaces across modalities. The shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) underscored disparities in technology access (Reynolds et al., 2022), student engagement (Kerr-Sims & Baker, 2021), and emotional well-being (Nurunnabi et al., 2020), while also revealing opportunities for innovation and growth. These challenges presented educators with a chance to rethink pedagogical approaches and foster resilience and adaptability in both students and themselves.

While navigating these changes, I began intentionally reflecting on my pedagogical practices and on my values as a college professor. By centering relationships and addressing students' emotional and intellectual needs, I sought to create an environment where learning could thrive despite unprecedented challenges. I realized that reflection, a tool I already used in my courses, could be leveraged more intentionally for engaging students in meaningful and humanizing pedagogies during this time of crisis. Reflection assignments with flexible deadlines and opportunities for student agency helped students co-construct meaning despite the distance, stress, and technological barriers inherent in remote learning, and these strategies have remained an integral part of my teaching as I move forward from ERT into intentionally designed in-person and online teaching.

Enacting a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 1984) became a blueprint for meeting students' needs during this time of collective trauma, emphasizing authentic relationships and intentional support. The framework asserts that care cannot be surface-level or performative but must stem from genuine efforts to know and support students. This approach aligns with Freire's (2005) work in fostering critically conscious learners and hooks' (1994) call to teach in ways that "respect and care for the souls" of students (p. 13). Unlike traditional moral education, which emphasizes teaching virtues through direct instruction, or traditional education that does not explicitly center virtue at all, care ethics emphasizes learning to care through lived experiences of caring. Enacting a pedagogy of care involves deeply immersing oneself in the concerns of the person being cared for, gaining an understanding of their experiences, and shifting one's motivation to prioritize responding to their needs.

This article explores how a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 1984) informed my approach to ERT and offers strategies for sustaining these practices in post-pandemic teaching. The argument unfolds in four parts: (a) the theoretical underpinnings of

care-based pedagogy, (b) an overview of ERT, (c) an exploration of pedagogy of care in practice, and (d) sustainable approaches to embedding care in college classrooms.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Prioritizing relationships in education and emphasizing the link between emotional and intellectual growth allows both students and teachers to engage in learning as their whole selves. The theoretical foundation for this work draws from two key frameworks: humanizing pedagogy and social constructivism. These perspectives informed my teaching decisions during ERT and continue to guide my efforts to create sustainable, care-centered practices.

Humanizing pedagogy emphasizes the holistic development of students, challenging traditional models of education that position learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Freire (2005) argues for education as a liberatory practice, where learners become critically conscious of themselves and their world. This approach requires educators to view students as fully-formed individuals with diverse experiences and agency, necessitating assignments that allow for choice and personal engagement. For example, open-ended projects during ERT empowered students to make decisions about their learning processes and outcomes, fostering both autonomy and connection. hooks (1994) extends this perspective, asserting that teaching "in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p. 13). During ERT, this care-centered approach became particularly urgent as students faced heightened stressors and challenges. By creating opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and flexibility, I sought to honor their humanity while fostering intellectual engagement. Noddings (1984) emphasizes that care in education must go beyond surface-level gestures, requiring genuine efforts to understand and support students.

As an educator at a private, Catholic institution, I also situate humanizing pedagogy within the framework of intrinsic human dignity. This idea of intrinsic dignity is a foundational principle of Catholic social teaching rooted in the belief that every person is created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), which grants each individual inherent worth and value, independent of their status, accomplishments, or circumstances. Similarly, American Catholic writer, theologian, and Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1998) highlights the dignity of individuals as foundational to social justice work, viewing it as a moral imperative to create spaces that respect and uplift each person's unique contributions.

Building on the principles of humanizing pedagogy, my approach also aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism. This framework highlights the importance of social context and collaboration in learning. Social constructivism conceptualizes knowledge as being constructed through interaction, dialogue, and shared experiences, which makes relationships between students and teachers vital to the learning process.

During ERT, social constructivism provided me a guide for fostering engagement and collaboration, even in digital spaces. Intentional design choices, such as peer-to-peer interactions, group projects, and opportunities for student feedback, helped mitigate the isolating effects of remote learning. These practices emphasized the importance of context, acknowledging the unique challenges and experiences of students during the pandemic.

Together, humanizing pedagogy and social constructivism offer a framework for creating learning environments that prioritize care, connection, and critical engagement. These theoretical underpinnings not only informed my pandemic teaching strategies but also continue to provide a foundation for reimagining education in a post-pandemic world.

Emergency Remote Teaching: Challenges and Innovations

ERT necessitated rapid adaptation, often replicating face-to-face teaching in less effective digital formats. Educators had to adapt their practices without the preparation or infrastructure typically associated with online instruction (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Social challenges involved limited human interaction and inadequate home learning environments (Ferri et al., 2020; Šinko et al., 2024), and students struggled with altered learning patterns, technology access, and maintaining a learning community (Colclasure et al., 2021). Faculty faced difficulties with pedagogical changes, work-life balance, and physical and mental health (Colclasure et al., 2021) and with integrating technology (Hanshaw et al, 2022). While this transition exposed critical challenges, it also highlighted innovative practices that have reshaped teaching, learning, and assessment in significant ways.

One of the most significant challenges of ERT was the inequity in access to technology and reliable internet, which disproportionately impacted marginalized and low-income students, further widening pre-existing educational disparities (Darmody et al., 2021; Reynolds et al., 2022; Reza, 2020; Shi et al., 2022). Similarly, instructors

struggled with a lack of training and experience in online pedagogy, leading to an overreliance on replicating face-to-face instruction in digital formats—a strategy that often fell short (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021).

Faculty and students also faced heightened emotional and financial strain during this period. Nurunnabi et al. (2020) note that the pandemic negatively affected individuals' mental health, compounding the challenges of remote learning environments. Female students, for instance, reported higher levels of anxiety and disruption to their academic progress compared to male peers (Sverdlik et al., 2023). Studies reveal increased levels of anhedonia, anxiety, and mood disorders among students during the pandemic (Buizza et al., 2022; Wieman et al., 2024). Students reported exacerbated stress levels, which affected their psychological well-being, particularly during remote learning and social isolation (Wong Aitken et al., 2024). For faculty, navigating personal responsibilities such as elder care, parenting, and homeschooling further complicated the demands of teaching in a "culture of high distraction" (Brown, 2021, para. 2).

Despite these obstacles, ERT catalyzed meaningful innovations in pedagogy and practice. Many educators adapted their strategies to focus on flexibility, well-being, and student-centered approaches. Some foundational principles of effective teaching, like well-designed courses and knowledgeable teachers (Collison et al., 2000), as well as high-quality, shortened video lectures (Guo et al., 2014) helped accommodate diverse student needs, fostering a more inclusive learning environment, while new, pandemic-specific ideas such as prioritizing mental health and community-building strategies met students where they were. Intentional efforts included virtual peer support groups and resilience-building interventions (Liu et al., 2021), self-care curricula (Schock et al., 2024), collaborative reflection activities (Smith et al., 2022), and intentional relationship building and more relaxed policies (Smith & Werse, 2024). These practices addressed the social isolation and disconnection many students faced, demonstrating the potential for education to support holistic well-being in times of crisis.

At the same time, the challenges of ERT highlighted the need for sustained professional development. Trust and Whalen (2020) found that 66% of educators surveyed believed more training in emergency remote teaching was essential. This finding was supported by Achen and Rutledge (2023), who found that faculty wanted more training on transitioning from ERT to intentionally developed online teaching.

Overall, faculty reported more barriers than supports to teaching during ERT but noted that formal and informal collaboration with colleagues was helpful to their professional development (Donham et al., 2022).

The pandemic significantly impacted college students' mental health and academic experiences in the long term. Post-pandemic, students show a preference for ongoing virtual classes and increased intentions to utilize mental health services, with younger and female students more likely to seek support (Galadima et al., 2024). Changes in lifestyle include decreased physical activity, increased sedentary behavior, and higher internet use (Buizza et al., 2022). Universities face the challenge of adapting to these shifts by enhancing mental health support, creating awareness, and accommodating diverse learning preferences (Galadima et al., 2024). The pandemic's impact on college students underscores the need for targeted interventions to address mental health concerns and support academic success in the post-pandemic era. Now, 5 years since the initial crisis response, these lessons underscore the importance of preparing educators not just for digital teaching but for fostering inclusive and adaptable learning environments.

Pedagogy of Care in Practice

Noddings' (1984) framework of care—encompassing modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation—provides a powerful foundation for creating supportive and inclusive learning environments. These principles guided my teaching during ERT and continue to inform my approach as I work toward sustainable caring practices in post-pandemic education.

Modeling care begins with the teacher's actions, attitudes, and priorities. Effective teacher education leadership requires exhibiting care while navigating challenges in program reform (Butler & Yendol-Hoppey, 2024). In online teaching, care ethics can be cultivated through authentic modeling, story, practice, dialogue, and addressing power dynamics in assessment (Rabin, 2021). One way I model care, beginning in ERT and moving forward is by proactively reaching out to a student who is struggling rather than waiting for them to contact me first. This act of reaching out demonstrates empathy and a genuine concern for the student's experience, setting a tone of care and support. By modeling this level of concern, I hope to foster a stronger teacher-student relationship and encourage the student to prioritize their well-being and feel valued as a person, not just a learner. My students often express relief when I reach out first after they miss an assignment or class, describing the shame and the

overwhelm that can creep in when trying to find a path forward once already behind. This is not to say that this approach is foolproof. Sometimes I reach out after a student misses an assignment and get no response. However, those non-answers are few and far between, and I argue that they are worth it to me, knowing that it does make a difference to students who want to learn but have encountered an obstacle.

By demonstrating flexibility and empathy, I sought to create a classroom culture that validated students' struggles and centered their well-being. For instance, I implemented flexible deadlines and built-in opportunities for students to share their personal challenges, reinforcing the idea that their lives outside the classroom mattered. During ERT, I implemented flexible assignment policies, allowing students to request extensions through the learning management system (LMS). This is more scalable for larger classes than trying to manage email requests but stays flexible and attuned to student needs. I also differentiated assignments by product to be more open-ended so that my students could submit work in alternative formats to accommodate their unique circumstances. These more flexible rubrics remain a part of my assessment practices even now. Learning outcomes are static, but the modality students use to convey mastery can vary based on student expertise and interest. These practices foster trust and reduce student stress. Maintaining flexible policies without compromising rigor requires careful calibration. In my current courses, I have a posted deadline of Fridays at 11:59 p.m. with an optional, no-questions-asked extension of Sundays at 11:59 p.m. My students have shared that even though they know this is not different from a Sunday deadline, they still appreciate the flexibility, and I've noticed less late work.

Dialogue is central to the pedagogy of care, as it fosters mutual understanding and trust between teachers and students. Regular check-ins with students, either one-on-one or in small groups, provide opportunities to build relationships, identify challenges, and offer tailored support, demonstrating genuine care for their well-being. During ERT, I prioritized one-on-one check-ins and open forums where students could voice concerns and suggestions. These conversations often revealed barriers I hadn't anticipated, allowing me to adjust my teaching to better meet their needs. During a class discussion during ERT, my students indicated that they were feeling isolated and disconnected, so I added more breakout rooms and group activities during class time. I have continued this practice of check-ins in my current teaching, intentionally scheduling a mid-course conversation in each of my courses, either as a whole group in my larger classes or one on one in my smaller courses. These conversations have given me insight

into necessary changes, like adjusting due dates or clarifying assignment directions that I might not have gotten feedback on until after the course had already ended.

Creating opportunities for students to practice care within the classroom reinforces its value and builds a community of mutual support. In my courses, I designed assignments that encouraged students to reflect on their own learning and engage in peer feedback. These activities emphasized empathy and collaboration, helping students build connections despite the physical distance of ERT. Community-building combats feelings of isolation and helps students develop interpersonal skills, creating a supportive environment where they feel valued, and I have continued that practice in my current teaching. This plays out in easy, obvious ways, like using discussion forums on the learning management system, and in less traditional ways, like assigning students a thinking partner on the first day of class with scheduled check-ins throughout the term. In the initial days of a course, when students are less likely to speak in class, I build community by giving students an opportunity to talk with their thinking partner before sharing with the broader class.

Confirmation involves recognizing and affirming students' efforts, emphasizing their growth and potential. During ERT, this often took the form of individualized feedback that acknowledged not just academic achievements but also the resilience and adaptability students demonstrated. By highlighting their strengths, I aimed to foster confidence and a sense of accomplishment. By incorporating open-ended reflective assignments where students can connect course material to their personal experiences, professional aspirations, or current challenges in any format, such as journals, voice memos, or creative projects, I was able not just to help them to see the relevance of the learning but also to target my feedback to their needs and perspectives and to engage in deeper dialogue with my students. Post-pandemic, I have had more flexibility in how I meet with my students, but I have kept many of my assignments open-ended in this way.

These practices stemmed from a belief that education must address the whole person—intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Noddings (1984) argued that teachers must know their students as individuals to enact genuine care. This philosophy guided my efforts to adapt traditional assignments into formats that accounted for students' unique circumstances. By modeling care, engaging in dialogue, and affirming students' efforts, I aimed to demonstrate that education could still be a space of growth and connection, even in the midst of crisis.

Sustainability and Future Considerations

As educators and institutions transition out of ERT, the sustainability of strategies implemented during the pandemic has become a pressing concern. While some innovations from ERT are worth maintaining, thoughtful adaptation is necessary to integrate these practices into post-pandemic education meaningfully. This section explores key considerations for sustaining care-based, flexible, and inclusive pedagogies.

"Hi-flex" teaching—simultaneously accommodating in-person and remote learners—became a prominent strategy during ERT. While it allowed for safer classrooms during the pandemic's early stages, the approach posed challenges, particularly for courses reliant on collaboration and group work. Research highlights the importance of designing hi-flex and hybrid models intentionally, ensuring they prioritize engagement and equity rather than defaulting to convenience (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017). Moving forward, educators must assess when and how these modalities serve both student learning and teacher capacity.

The rapid shift to digital tools during ERT underscored the importance of technology integration in education. However, effective technology use requires careful planning and support using well-established best practices. Darling-Hammond et al. (2014) emphasizes that digital learning frameworks must prioritize student-centered approaches, enabling differentiated instruction and active engagement. Similarly, Otto et al. (2024) advocate for tools that foster student ownership of learning, such as adaptive platforms and creative project-based tools.

The pandemic reinforced the link between education and well-being. Schools implemented mental health initiatives, peer support systems, and mindfulness practices to address the social and emotional challenges of ERT (Liu et al., 2021; Schock et al., 2024). These strategies exemplify Noddings' (1984) ethic of care and demonstrate that well-being should remain central to educational design, not just during crises but as a standard practice. I encourage faculty to explore how enacting a pedagogy of care could benefit their students and themselves.

Reflection emerged as a key component of ERT for both students and educators. Beauchamp and Thomas (2010) note that reflective practice helps pre-service teachers envision their professional identities, and this holds true for in-service educators

adapting to new realities. During ERT, informal reflection helped teachers identify successful strategies and areas for improvement (Mehrotra, 2021).

Ultimately, sustaining the lessons of ERT involves embedding care into the core of educational practice. A pedagogy of care is not a temporary solution but a foundational approach that fosters inclusive, equitable, and humanizing learning environments. As Noddings (1984) argued, this requires educators to model care, engage in meaningful dialogue, and affirm students' intrinsic dignity.

Conclusion

The rapid transition to ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed critical vulnerabilities in educational systems while also catalyzing meaningful innovations. These experiences compelled educators to reevaluate traditional approaches, prioritize well-being, and adopt flexible, care-centered practices that addressed the diverse needs of students. Although born out of necessity, these adaptations—grounded in Noddings' (1984) pedagogy of care—demonstrated the potential for fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Key lessons from ERT include the importance of flexibility, technology integration, and well-being as pillars of effective education. Above all, the focus on care—through Noddings' (1984) framework of modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation—provided a blueprint for addressing the holistic needs of students and fostering meaningful connections, even in a virtual setting. Practices such as flexible deadlines, intentional check-ins, and reflective assignments offered students the support they needed to navigate personal challenges while maintaining academic engagement. These strategies align with the principles of care, equity, and student-centered learning, but sustaining them requires thoughtful integration into post-pandemic educational frameworks.

Student feedback during and after ERT affirms the effectiveness of these care-centered practices. Many students shared their appreciation for the personal connection and flexibility that was built into the course structure, many noting that they felt less stressed and more supported in their learning. My course evaluations consistently reflect high levels of student satisfaction, with comments highlighting how practices like individualized feedback, flexible deadlines, and regular check-ins help students to stay engaged and seen, even when faced with challenges. These responses suggest that enacting a pedagogy of care not only supports academic outcomes but also fosters a more humane, responsive learning environment.

As educators and students alike move beyond the immediate crisis of the pandemic, the challenge lies in sustaining these innovations. The pedagogy of care must remain central to our practices, not as a temporary response but as a foundational philosophy that guides the evolution of education. This requires ongoing reflection, professional development, and institutional commitment to creating inclusive and compassionate learning environments (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010; Mehrotra, 2021).

However, sustaining these practices also necessitates addressing the systemic challenges highlighted during ERT. Equity in access to technology, support for educators' well-being, and the refinement of hybrid and hi-flex models remain priorities. Without thoughtful adaptation and institutional support, the progress made during ERT risks becoming another fleeting moment of crisis-driven change.

Reflecting on this journey underscores hooks' (1994) assertion that "engaged pedagogy" demands more of educators but offers the profound reward of seeing students grow and thrive in ways that transcend academic achievement. By embracing a pedagogy of care, educators can transform the classroom into a space that nurtures not only intellectual growth but also the humanity of every learner.

Moving forward, the lessons of ERT allow an opportunity to reimagine what is possible in education. These ideas are particularly relevant in discussions about pedagogical approaches and curriculum design at any level of instruction. Flexible policies, intentional technology use, and care-centered approaches are not just strategies for navigating emergencies—they are tools for building a more equitable and inclusive educational system. Continuing this work, I hope to hold onto the empathy, adaptability, and innovation that defined teaching during the pandemic, using these experiences to create lasting, meaningful change.

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