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Citation for final published version:

Tombs, Michal 2022. How to apply a pedagogy of care in the virtual environment: A guide for online educators in clinical education. How To Series, Cardiff University , pp. 1-2.

Publishers page: [https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0...](https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0...)

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## How to apply a pedagogy of care in the virtual environment: A guide for online educators in clinical education

**Michal Tombs**

One of the key lessons learnt from the Covid-19 Pandemic is that to be able to operate successfully and happily in the online environment, the online educator (e-educator) requires the development of unique online teaching skills. This is because online learners have diverse needs and learning at a distance has a distinct set of challenges. During the pandemic, the concept of *pedagogy of care* increased in popularity, focusing on how it can be applied to online teaching during this period of time (Bali, 2020). However, many online learners who work in clinical settings go through very difficult times during their studies, and the complexities and constraints in which they learn, and work, can cause personal crisis. Medical educators are likely to have well-developed strategies for supporting their learners, but even the most experienced may need help developing the skill of teaching online beyond the pandemic. The purpose of this How To is to help e-educators consider how e-moderation principles can be extended in order for them to embed a pedagogy of care when teaching online.

### The online educator as an e-moderator

One of the most well known models of online education is that of e-moderation. Since its inception, the model generated wide appeal and has been applied extensively in structuring online programmes. Its appeal comes from the notion that the role of the online educator is to ensure that online learners reach the end of the 'learning mountain' with a productive experience. Underpinned by constructivist principles, Salmon (2013) developed the Five Stage Model of E-moderation, which highlights the importance of scaffolding (see Figure 1).

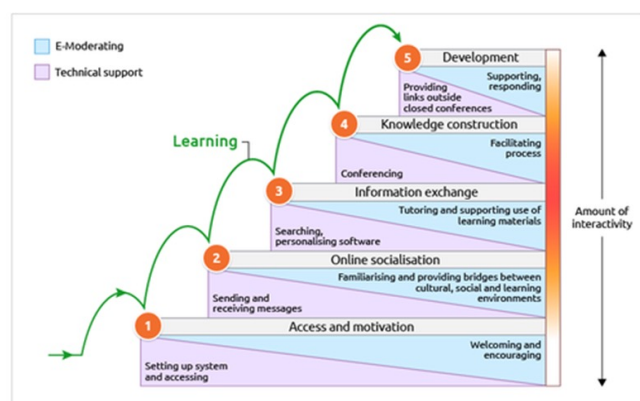


Figure 1: The Five Stage Model (Salmon, 2013)

**Stage 1: Access and Motivation** – The e-moderator has a role in creating a motivating environment, ensuring that learners know how to take part, how to log on, when and how frequently to come back.

**Stage 2: Online Socialisation** – The e-moderator acts as the 'host' and sets up the learning culture, making sure that learners can take part online and know how to navigate and how to respond, encouraging them to interact.

**Stage 3: Information Exchange** – The role of the e-moderator is to design good quality activities that encourages interactivity, supporting learners, giving feedback, encouraging them to work together.

**Stage 4: Knowledge Construction** – At this stage the e-moderator is less involved, but the role of facilitation and feedback is very important. This is achieved by keeping an eye on engagement and learners' contributions and input into activities.

**Stage 5: Development** – By the time learners reach this stage, they may not require much technological assistance, and the role of the e-moderator is to support and respond. Assessment may be involved (formative and summative).

Despite its appeal, the model has been criticized for its overemphasis on learning through interaction and for failing to recognise that not all learning occurs as part of a community. Indeed, other learning theories, aside from constructivism, could inform online education. Intentional engagement in care-focused teaching calls for online educators to recognise that online learners come from diverse social-cultural backgrounds and their experience of digital literacy is varied. Thus, it may be argued that alongside the interactivity bar running beside the steps, there should be a 'care bar', calling the online educator to embed a *pedagogy of care* through the model's stages (Burke and Larmer, 2020).

### Pedagogy of Care

In response to campus closures that were happening globally, Bali (2020) developed an online resource explaining how educators might support their students through the pandemic. Care for students is the thing most of us already carry inside of us and the points that Bali makes are valid beyond the pandemic. Burke and Larmer (2020) provide a very useful summary of how pedagogy of care principles can be embedded at every stage of course development and delivery, which fall under the categories of Modelling, Dialogue, Practice and Confirmation.

**Modelling** – As a starting point, the course philosophy and design must be considered carefully to create an online learning environment where every student feels respected and valued.

- **Modelling care through intentionally person-centred online interaction** – When a positive personal tone permeates all written and spoken communications, where the educator conveys their 'personhood' and invites students to do the same, this models caring communication for students. This is

about being authentic and open with your learners by making yourself vulnerable and sharing of yourself. Show care in habitual ways, like always asking students how they are feeling, or checking in with them on a discussion board.

- *Exercising immediacy and responsiveness* – the e-educator needs to develop and maintain a strong online presence. Facilitating timely, supportive responses to students using a range of online communication approaches and technologies (synchronized and asynchronous) conveys a sense of individuals being valuable members of the learning community.
- *Demonstrating compassion* – This is about acknowledging the complexities of students' lives and providing responses that support student learning. This is particularly important for students who study and learn in complex healthcare environments. We cannot give a hug or make "true" eye contact online, but we can show care in other ways. Using humorous memes, caring images or digital cards are some examples

**Dialogue** – The absence of non-verbal cues, eye-contact and informal conversation, makes online dialogue more challenging, but not impossible. Dialogue can be nurtured online by enacting intentional strategies.

- *Dialogical orientation* - Caring dialogue in online contexts requires opportunity for students to engage in meaningful discussion through multiple modes, synchronously and asynchronously. Learners need to feel comfortable reaching you privately and engage in dialogue with you, as well as their peers.
- *Respectful communication* - Expectations around effective communication should be modelled and explicitly expressed to students at the commencement of, and throughout the course of study. This is fundamental to ensuring a culture of respect and mutual care is established and maintained.

**Practice** - This is concerned with developing opportunities for learners to engage in practical experiences that build capacity to care about their learning, with a focus on transformative outcomes.

- *Emphasising the transformative impact of learning* - intentionally building opportunities to guide students towards developing their own care for course content is facilitated through practical-based learning experiences, and intentional focus on the transformative impact of learning through dialogue.

- *Fostering mutual interaction through creative use of online technologies* - As an e-educator you can show care with words and use of the technological tools available to you. A 'like' or a 'smile', can be powerful in acknowledging that you have read and appreciate the contributions made by learners. If you find that some students experience internet connectivity issues, ensure you do low bandwidth asynchronous work or at least provide options.

**Confirmation** - Learners are encouraged towards personal growth that occurs within the context of a caring relationship between the e-educator and student. This is nurtured through:

- *Immediate and purposeful feedback* - Feedback mechanisms delivered in a timely manner to provide purposeful, supportive reflections relating to a student's engagement. It includes provision of personalised feedback that highlights transformative dimensions of a student's learning journey.
- *'Passing on the baton'* - This refers to teaching and communication techniques that inspire students in their journeys as emerging practitioners. This can be achieved by sharing own personal stories, drawing on the practice-wisdom in the field.

## Summary

Caring for our students is not a new concept, and most of us teach with care intuitively. However, for the novice online educator, showing students care is not as straightforward and requires re-thinking. In this How To, some strategies were presented on how a *pedagogy of care* can be applied by e-educators, through careful use of technology, resources, and tools. It particularly asks online educators to consider the motivations and diversity of online learners. Crucially, it is about ensuring that the way in which we communicate with our students, how we respond, how we teach, and how we assess, are based on a range of learning theories and underpinned by principles associated with moral education (Nodding, 2010).

## References and further reading

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