

3-25-2015

# Stories of Care in the Virtual Classroom: An Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry

Brooke Boback Eisenbach

University of South Florida, [brooke.eisenbach@gmail.com](mailto:brooke.eisenbach@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#)

## Scholar Commons Citation

Eisenbach, Brooke Boback, "Stories of Care in the Virtual Classroom: An Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry" (2015). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.

<https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5477>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

Stories of Care in the Virtual Classroom: An Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry

by

Brooke Boback Eisenbach

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction  
with a concentration in English Education  
Department of Teaching and Learning  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

Co-Major Professor: Patricia Daniel Jones, Ph.D.  
Co-Major Professor: Cheryl Ellerbrock, Ph.D.  
Joan Kaywell, Ph.D.  
Patricia Alvarez-McHatton, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
March 25, 2015

Keywords: virtual education, online learning, distance learners, virtual teachers, secondary  
virtual classroom, relational care

Copyright © 2015, Brooke Boback Eisenbach

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. Thank you for your love and support throughout the entire doctoral process. Your unwavering faith in my ability to accomplish this goal in my life helped me persevere and make it to the finish line. Thank you for being my guide, my support, and my cheering section along the way. I love you all!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people I would like to thank for their love, help, encouragement, and guidance in the completion of this dissertation. First and foremost, I want to thank my incredible, loving husband. Thank you for inspiring me to follow my dream in pursuing this degree. I wouldn't have set foot on the college campus if it weren't for your suggestion and guidance, and I certainly wouldn't have made it through the doctoral program and dissertation process if it weren't for your unrelenting belief that I could, and would, succeed. Thank you for pushing me forward when I felt like giving up; thank you for loving me at my worst; and thank you for having faith in me, when I felt my own faith falling short. I love you!

Thank you to my little girl for helping Mommy along the way. Whether it was your desire to imitate my use of post-it notes around the house, your desire to assist me in highlighting every page of my textbook, or simply making me smile day after day, you helped me maintain momentum and my own desire to complete this degree. You have brought so much love and joy into my life. Mommy loves you so very much.

I want to thank Dr. Patricia Daniel Jones for your guidance throughout my time in the program. Thank you for helping me find the hidden writer within myself, and for encouraging me to share my words with the world. Thank you for being there to lend moral support at moments when I simply didn't think I could persevere, and thank you for pushing me to always be honest with myself. Finally, thank you for being the professor who helped instill my motivations to grow as a middle level teacher. Thank you for being the professor I dream to be.

I'd like to thank Dr. Cheryl Ellerbrock for your support and leadership. Thank you for providing me opportunities to grow as a researcher and scholar throughout my doctoral education. You gave of your time – time that could have been spent with family, or in pursuing your tenure – to help me reach my dream. I hope to one day provide the same encouragement and opportunity to others, as you have shown to me.

Thank you to Dr. Joan Kaywell for your honesty and guidance. I could always count on you to give it to me straight. I appreciated that you were a constant voice of reason, and support. Thank you for encouraging my appreciation and love of YA literature, and helping me find ways to encourage this same love of reading for my students. Thank you for providing me opportunities to network, and join you at state and national conferences. Finally, thank you for providing me opportunities to develop my writing, and grow as an educator.

I also want to thank Dr. Patricia Alvarez-McHatton. Thank you for opening my eyes to the world of arts-based qualitative research. You helped me to see that research can be more than a list of statistics – it can touch the heart and soul. Thank you for helping me to discover the researcher lurking within myself, and for allowing me to finally see that yes, I AM a researcher. Finally, thank you for your willingness to give of your time and attention to remain on my doctoral committee. I could not have completed this autoethnography without you – and that's the reliable truth.

I'd like to extend a word of gratitude to my family and friends. Thank you to Dr. Paula Taylor-Greathouse, Taylor Sampson, Jennifer Breaux, and Kimberly Kettering for your patience, support, and friendship. Thank you for being there to offer me help throughout this entire process – whether it be through editing, listening to me ramble on and on about my study or vent frustrations, providing me feedback on my stories, offering a shoulder for me to cry on, or

simply being there at the moment I need you. Thank you for your friendship. And, thank you to my parents, my in-laws, and my siblings. Thank you for taking time to listen as I rehearse presentations, read articles, and discuss my ideas. Thank you for always believing in me, and helping me maintain faith in myself. I couldn't have made it through this process without each and every one of you. I love you all

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Allow Me to Introduce Myself.....	3
Statement of the Problem.....	7
Purpose of the Study.....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	9
Care Theory in the Traditional Classroom.....	9
Meeting Adolescent Needs Through Relational Care.....	14
Tradition to Innovation: Transitioning Relational Care to the Virtual Classroom.....	15
Research Question.....	16
Method of the Study.....	16
Significance of the Study.....	18
Assumptions.....	19
Timeline.....	20
Definition of Terms.....	21
Summary.....	22
Chapter Two.....	23
Laying the Foundation for my Review of the Literature.....	23
Literature Review.....	24
The Growth of the Virtual Classroom.....	24
Traits of a Caring Teacher.....	25
Characteristics of a Successful Online Learner.....	30
Translating Care in the Online Classroom.....	33
Research on Effective Online Teaching.....	33
Role of Social Presence and Immediacy on Effective Teaching.....	36
Student-Teacher Relationships in the Online Classroom.....	41
Relational Care in the Online Classroom.....	45
Summary.....	47
Chapter Three.....	49
Taking a Narrative Turn in Educational Research.....	49

Method.....	51
Narrative as Research.....	51
Autoethnography.....	52
Rationale for Method.....	53
Data Collection.....	54
Data Analysis.....	56
Quality of the Data.....	60
Ethics.....	61
Limitations.....	62
Summary.....	64
Chapter Four.....	66
It's Only the Beginning.....	66
8:00 a.m. – Day 1.....	66
1:00 p.m. – Day 1.....	72
2:00 p.m. – Day 1.....	77
5:00 p.m. – Day 1.....	84
Class Loads and Stella... The Perfect Combination – Six Months Later.....	89
In Search of a Balance – One Year Later.....	109
8:00 a.m.....	109
10:00 a.m.....	116
1:00 p.m.....	125
5:00 p.m.....	130
Chapter Five.....	134
Epilogue.....	134
Findings.....	136
Theme 1: Teacher Presence.....	137
Theme 2: Dialogue.....	139
Theme 3: Observation.....	141
Theme 4: Tailored Instruction.....	143
Theme 5: Personalized Learning.....	144
Theme 6: Recognition.....	145
Relational Care Beyond the Classroom.....	146
Care for Self.....	148
Academic Care in the Online Classroom.....	149
Discussion.....	150
Reflection.....	152
Implications for Future Research.....	156
References.....	158
Appendix A: Character List.....	166
Appendix B: List of Weekly Responsibilities.....	168



Appendix C: IRB Exemption.....170

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Role of Teacher Interaction in Overall School Experience.....	29
Table 2: Categories of Teacher Perspectives on Motivation.....	35
Table 3: Parallel Themes.....	151

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Relational Care Theory.....	11
Figure 2. Timeline.....	20
Figure 3: Flow of Literature Review.....	24
Figure 4: Data Analysis Process.....	58
Figure 5: Final Steps in Data Analysis.....	59
Figure 6: Emergent Themes of Relational Care.....	137

## ABSTRACT

Since their inception in 2006, K-12 virtual classrooms have spread across the nation, reaching millions of students every day. Despite the technological changes in today's society, adolescents who lack key personal characteristics may struggle to successfully complete online coursework. A caring teacher-student relationship may assist today's virtual learners in ways that enhance motivation, learning, and online education success. Although a veteran teacher of nine years, in this autoethnographic narrative inquiry, I shared my experience as a novice, English I virtual teacher as I strived to enact relational with my virtual education students.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The end of the nine weeks was fast approaching. As I reviewed my grade book, I was dismayed to find Amelia holding steady at a failing grade.

“Amelia, can I see you for a minute outside, please?” I asked as my eighth-grade students moved into their small literature circle groups for novel discussions.

As we stepped outside, I displayed the print copy of Amelia’s current progress report. “I noticed your grade has dropped,” I stated with a tone of concern. “Are things rough at home again?”

Amelia shrugged her shoulders and cast her eyes toward her worn sneakers.

“Come on, Amelia; talk to me. I know you understand the material. I can see it when you share your ideas with us in our class discussions. So, talk to me. What’s going on? Why is this grade so low?”

“Well, I *used* to have a really hard time doing homework because my parents were always fighting with one another in the next room. But, since Spring break, it’s a lot quieter at home. So, I guess I can do more studying now than I used to, so that’s a good thing.”

I waited a moment, then asked, “It’s quieter now, huh?”

Amelia finally looked in my direction. I could sense the pain behind her veiled attempt at indifference. “So, who left? Did dad leave?” I dared to ask, taking her prior words as indication she was ready to share her story with me.

“Yeah. My dad left. He took off without warning,” she revealed in a hushed tone.

“I see,” I quietly responded. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Sure,” she stated, shifting her gaze back towards the concrete floor. “I just... I don’t know. I mean, I didn’t see it coming for some reason. My parents got into another fight and this time he just decided to pack up and go. I haven’t heard from him since. I have no idea where he is, and my mom isn’t taking it too well.”

Amelia paused, then met my eyes. “I’m sorry I haven’t been too focused on school stuff lately. I promise to try harder.”

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” I answered. “I’m so sorry all of this is happening.” I wished I could say more, something that would help ease the pain. No wonder she wasn’t able to focus on school right now. How could I blame her? Certainly, it would be difficult for her to focus on plot structure and character development at a time when her life was in such upheaval. “If there’s ever anything you need, you know you can come to me,” I shared.

“Yeah, I know, Mrs. E.,” replied Amelia. She gazed back towards the ground.

“Okay,” I started, “So, how about we do this: The school has tutoring during lunch. You could try using that to get caught up. Though, you probably prefer to have that time as a break, and to be with your friends.”

Amelia smiled. “Yeah.”

An idea suddenly occurred to me. “Or,” I stated, “I usually arrive at school by eight every morning. How about you come up here whenever you get to school and we can work together to make sure you bring your grade up? You can use the model notebook to get your missing work.”

“That works,” responded Amelia.

“And Amelia, if you ever want to just come in and talk, you know you can do that, too. Okay?” I asked as I gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder.

“Yeah, I know,” she sighed. “Thanks, Mrs. E.” Amelia looked at me and gave a half-smile as we returned to the classroom.

### **Allow Me to Introduce Myself**

My earliest memories consist of countless summer days spent playing “school” at my grandparents’ house. My grandmother purchased an antique school desk and placed it in the spare bedroom. Every morning, I would line my stuffed animals along the center of a twin-sized bed and force my little sister to take a seat at the rickety wooden desk. With a yellow legal pad in hand, I would share my daily lecture. My “students” would then demonstrate their understanding of my instruction by completing one of hundreds of random worksheets - worksheets I requested each year from my elementary school teachers before departing for summer vacation.

It would be years before I would fully understand the significance of my imaginative play. Simply put, I was *born* to teach. It is a craft that to this day courses through my veins and bleeds onto every aspect of my personal and professional life.

I have since moved beyond the confines of a pretend school in my grandparents’ home. In 2004, I completed my bachelor’s degree in English Education at the University of South Florida and soon after found a position teaching seventh-grade language arts in a large, rural school in central Florida. While working as a full-time teacher, I continued to earn my master’s degree in Reading Education, achieve my National Board Certification in Middle Level English Education, and worked my way through the doctoral program in English Education at the University of South Florida. I was honored to be named the Florida Council for Teachers of English (FCTE) 2012 Teacher of the Year and the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) 2013 Edwin A. Hoey Award Recipient for outstanding teaching in the field of middle-level English.

I taught middle school English for nine years. In that time, I honed my craft and course content. I developed into a reflective, caring practitioner. I learned to see my students as more than adolescent minds in need of education; they were individuals with diverse strengths and needs. I worked to establish a classroom environment that fostered a sense of community and care – a classroom where *every* student could feel a sense of belonging and security. I wanted my students to take academic risks and learn from the lives and experiences of their peers. I wanted my students to uncover their own passions in life, to find those things which spoke to them on a personal level, and as a teacher, uncover ways to infuse these personal interests within my daily instruction.

In my own way, I *cared* for my students. I cared for their education – that they saw the potential within themselves, and strived to meet that potential in their studies. I cared for their development – that they witnessed their own growth as a student and member of society, and continued to grow in their ability to care for and understand others. And, I cared for their overall well-being – their physical and emotional self. My students knew they could approach me with questions and concerns. They knew they could confide in me, and I would listen. They knew they could trust me to strive to meet their expressed needs.

I spent nine years following my passion for education behind the door of a middle school classroom – nine years refining my craft and learning more about my students and myself through our daily interactions. And then, my passion took me elsewhere.

In the winter of 2012, I found myself nearing the completion of my doctoral coursework. I began to panic. It was almost time to begin working on my final dissertation, and I worried I would never have the time. I feared becoming just another statistic – another graduate student who calls it quits before the finish line. I longed to one day work within a college of education,



assisting in the preparation of tomorrow's teachers. But, I knew I would never get there by moving at a snail's pace.

As a wife and mother, I had responsibilities to address within my personal life. Too often, I neglected my family in favor of my professional and academic needs. Evening classes and research group meetings meant I was away from my husband and daughter all too often. Yet, even on the rare night I was at home, physical presence did little to stifle the flood of concerns running through my mind - papers I needed to grade, lessons plans I needed to write, homework I must somehow complete.

Even as I approached the end of my coursework, I worried I would never have time to focus on family *and* my dissertation if I had to continue teaching full time. And, although I hoped to gain more experience with collegiate instruction as a graduate assistant, my family couldn't afford to lose my current stream of income. To say I was stressed would be an understatement. I would often cry to my husband that I made it so far just to fail. I was a mother, a wife, a teacher, and a student. How on earth would I find the time to do it all?

It so happened that a friend and former colleague was teaching for a state-wide online school district. She talked me through the day-to-day experiences of being an online teacher and made it sound like something I might enjoy. It also sounded like a viable option if I hoped to successfully balance my personal, academic, and professional life. She suggested I consider applying for a position with the high school English department. After discussing it with my husband, and giving it a great deal of careful consideration, I made the bittersweet decision to apply.

Just a few months later, I received notification that I was selected to begin the interview process. Not long after, I was offered a position with the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English department in a part-

time virtual education program. While it weighed on my heart to abandon my middle-schoolers just a few months shy of our summer break, I accepted the position and resigned from my brick-and-mortar school.

It was never my intention to complete a dissertation study focused on care within the online classroom. In fact, my original study focused on care with relation to scripted curriculum. Yet, as I began the transition to my new role as an online teacher, I quickly realized there existed a world of difference between the realities of the virtual classroom and the world of brick-and-mortar teaching I idealized as a child and grew to understand. As I sat in my initial teacher training sessions, I couldn't help but notice the clear and distinct focus on "care" within this particular educational institution. The trainers consistently referred to the school's focus on having the student at the center of every decision we make, and the need to demonstrate care with students and parents.

I began to wonder, how will I do this? How will I note the needs of my online students when I can't see them or speak to them on a daily basis? How will I connect with them when I never meet them face-to-face? How will I *care*?

It was then the idea for my dissertation sparked. Here I was, a veteran teacher – an award-winning educator – transitioning into a new role – a novice in the world of virtual education. My prior efforts to cultivate relational care would need adjustment if I hoped to be successful in the online classroom. I would no longer see my students in real-time, or benefit from physical presence as I did in the brick-and-mortar setting. In fact, as a teacher within an online part-time classroom, my virtual students would be enrolled in an alternate classroom (physical or homeschool) while simultaneously enrolled in my course. My class would not be a full-time virtual institution, or the place of full-time enrollment in lieu of public or private

school. Instead, my students would have outside academic responsibilities and commitments that might take precedent over my coursework each week. My class would serve as a means of recovering a course credit, graduating early, or an alternative means of education for homeschool students. My course would not be the school of record for my students. Rather, it would be a class they complete through a homeschool program, or in addition to a full course-load within a traditional school setting. The chance that my course would be neglected, or come in last in terms of priorities, was a real possibility for my online students.

Yet, despite the obvious distinctions within my teacher roles and course setting, I maintained a belief system founded on the knowledge that caring teacher-student relationships can and do make a difference in education. I knew that unless I could find a way to demonstrate care for my students, and maintain a relationship in my classroom, I would not be able to continue as a virtual teacher. Therefore, why not document my journey, note my efforts, and grow as an educator in the process through an autoethnographic study? Why not share my experience with others and further assist my fellow teachers in finding a way to care in the virtual classroom?

### **Statement of the Problem**

The world of education is undergoing a radical transformation as students move from the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom setting to an online learning format (Evergreen Education Group, 2012). Students are now taking courses in blended learning, part-time, and full-time virtual classrooms. Blended learning environments provide a combination of virtual and face-to-face instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In part-time programs, students receive supplemental education online, along with enrollment in a traditional face-to-face or homeschool

programs. Full-time programs provide students an option outside of the traditional school setting, as they receive their entire curriculum online.

As of 2012, 31 states offer fully online, state-wide virtual schools or state-led distance learning. Two-thirds of U.S. school districts have had students enrolled in online or blended learning courses (Evergreen Education Group, 2012). Although an exact number is unknown due to programs that are not tracked, it is estimated that more than five percent of the K-12 population in the nation are taking part in online learning (Evergreen Education Group, 2012).

Caring teachers, or teachers who demonstrate relational care by taking the time to listen, reflect, and address student needs (Noddings, 2012), are important to many of today's students (Alder, 2002; Alder & Moulton, 1998; Edmonds, 1992) as they help students find the drive to succeed in their education (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Dillon, 1989; Garza, 2009), and they assist students in developing a sense of belonging (Cassidy & Bates, 2005), well-being (Garza, 2009), and moral development (Alder, 2002). While research has demonstrated the value in establishing care with adolescent learners, there is currently scant literature which seeks to share methods for effectively transmitting relational care, or the act of reciprocal caring that takes place between two individuals, within an online setting. Our change in approach to education – the enhanced use of modern technology and increase in online learning environments – does not in itself change the basic nature of our students. If anything, the current trend in online student attrition lends itself to the need for online classrooms that foster student motivation, autonomy, achievement beliefs, and sense of self-efficacy. Therefore, the question becomes: In what ways do teachers meet these needs within the online classroom? Relational care can work to address the individual needs of each student, thereby possibly decreasing online attrition and promoting student success. Virtual teachers should establish an ethic of care with adolescent students and

transmit relational care within an online class setting. But first, we must identify ways to successfully establish and enact such care in the online classroom.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Noddings' relational care theory, as described below, provides teachers a means of connecting with students in a personal and meaningful way (2012). As teachers act as the carer and strive to meet the needs of the cared-for, or students, we can find ways to address their personal, developmental, and educational needs. In turn, the students demonstrate the care has been received and can reciprocate care for the teacher.

My purpose with this study is to share my experiences in enacting relational care with my online students. I want to engage a wider audience in the possible cultural and social aspects of my experience through publication to teachers, administrators, and policymakers. I hope to expand on current relational care theory as it applies to the ever-growing virtual classroom environment, and share my experience as a novice, online English teacher as I intentionally strive to foster a caring relationship with my online-learning students. In doing so, I will share the realities of my experience versus the ideal in enacting an ethic of relational care. In this way, my own story can translate with readers as they connect my experience to their own experiences within the online classroom.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Care Theory in the Traditional Classroom**

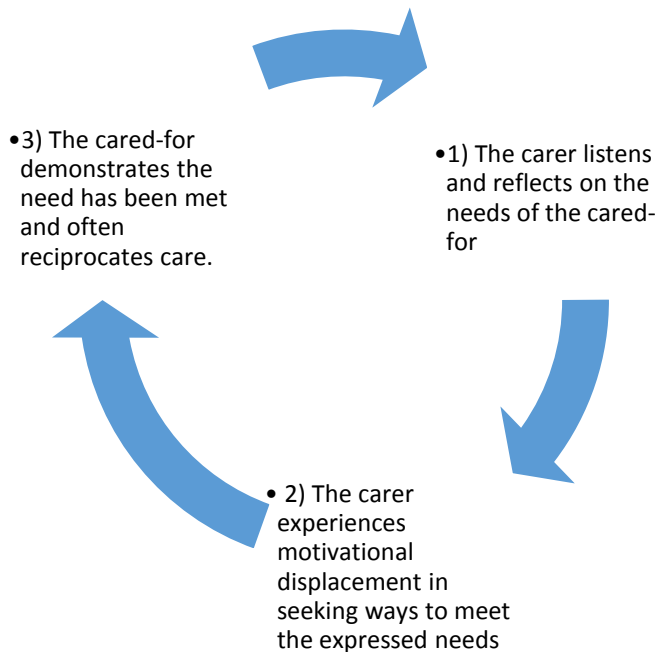
Theorists have contemplated the meaning of “care” for years (Gilligan, 1982; Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 1988; Tronto, 1993). It's a difficult term to define within stringent parameters. After all, the act of caring differs from person to person and situation to situation. While I follow Gilligan's (1982) feminist ideals that care should be held in as high regard as justice within our

society, I'm not in complete agreement that care remain a feminine connection. I agree with Tronto's (1993) belief in "care" as a practice that holds the possibility of repairing our world (1993), but want to maintain my focus for this study on enacting a caring relationship between the student and virtual teacher, with attention to the recognition and reciprocity of care. My personal beliefs regarding "care" align with Mayeroff's (1971) focus on care as a process of helping another individual "grow". Much like Mayeroff's (1971) discussion on the need to see care as complete through the demonstration of personal growth, Noddings focuses on the need for relational care to be received by the cared-for. Yet, I find that Noddings' discussion of care as incomplete without recognition by the cared-for to demonstrate my own belief with attention to the caring relationship. Overall, I find that my key focus and belief in "care" as a reciprocal, relational act stem from Nodding's theory of relational care (2012).

In fact, Nodding's current prominence within the educational community, and the manner in which I was inundated with relational care theory within my graduate coursework and over the course of my tenure as a classroom teacher, helped to shape me into the teacher I am today. My experiences in the classroom helped me to see that each child is unique, with a unique set of needs. Though I may believe I'm "caring" for my students, if they don't recognize the care to be genuine, or received, then the act of caring is incomplete. For these reasons, I find my own definition, practice and ideologies to align with the ideas presented within Noddings' approach to relational care theory. As a teacher, I would strive to listen, reflect, and act on the individual needs of my students. In doing so, I sought confirmation of care and noted how students would reciprocate care for me throughout the school year. Whether it was taking time to write me a note when they understood I was having a rough day, or giving greater attention to lessons during

classroom observations, students also took time to note my needs and find ways to address those needs during our time together.

According to Noddings (2012), relational care begins in examining the relation itself. In relational care ethics, there are two individuals – the carer and the cared-for. The carer first devotes attention to the cared-for, making sure to listen to the individual needs, desires, and concerns of the cared-for. The carer then extends what Noddings refers to as “motivational displacement” upon the cared-for. The carer is motivated to meet the expressed needs of the cared-for and moves to action in an effort to “care” or meet the needs of the individual. In order for the interaction to be complete, the cared-for must receive the care. This reception could be demonstrated in several different ways – e.g. a smile, a word of gratitude, or simply in having her expressed need met. Figure 1 demonstrates the cycle noted in relational care theory.



*Figure 1.* Relational care theory process demonstrating cyclical process and reciprocity.

So, what does it mean to be a “caring teacher”? When one examines the tenets of a caring teacher with a focus on relational care, one begins by describing the teacher’s willingness to

listen. Unlike virtuous care, or assumed care, in which the teacher gives attention to what s/he or the institution believes to be the needs of the student, relational care involves listening to the expressed needs of the individual child, whether those needs are institutional in nature or other (Noddings, 2012).

For instance, a “virtuous carer” might examine Amelia’s grade, note a need to see her excel in the course, and choose to focus attention on Amelia’s academic needs and progress claiming she would “thank me for this later” (Noddings, 2012). Whereas, a “relational carer” takes the time to talk with Amelia and listen to what it is she has to say. Why is she failing the course? What circumstances have led her here? What is it she *needs* from me at this time? While both aspects of care address a focus on academics and academic needs, relational care provides opportunity to reflect on the expressed need, rather than an assumption of need.

Relational carers are willing to set aside their own interpretations and conclusions so they may focus on the needs expressed by the cared-for. Once the cared-for has expressed a need, relational carers take time to think (Noddings, 2012). Their goal is to achieve empathetic accuracy (Ickes, 1997; Noddings, 1992, 2012; Stueber, 2006). Rather than ask, “How would *I* feel if *I* were in this situation,” they strive to think and understand what the cared-for is currently experiencing.

For example, in giving attention to Amelia’s story, on some level, I could relate to her pain in a disruption to her family structure. As a young girl, I also had a parent who made the decision to leave. However, this was not *my* story. It was Amelia’s story. It was *her* experience. In noting this, as a relational carer, it is my job to consider Amelia’s experience and how she might feel given her father’s decision to walk away from her life. What was it *she* needed from *me*? How might I help?



Reflection is an essential aspect of relational care (Noddings, 2012). Rather than jump to unwarranted conclusions, we must be willing to digest what we have learned and experienced and consider the avenues of action we might take in working to meet the expressed needs of our students. Amelia knew she could speak with me about her home life. She knew she was safe to express her worries about her father's abandonment. Why is this? Because as a relational carer, I strived to cultivate a classroom that demonstrated consideration and trust. In order for the cared-for to feel as though they can express their needs and know their needs will be met, a teacher must strive to cultivate care on a regular basis. Students need to feel a sense of safety and belonging in the classroom. They have to know they can trust their teacher (Alder, 2002; Noddings, 2012). Amelia knew she could trust me to listen and help her in meeting her expressed needs.

The final tenet of a caring teacher is one who extends a moral climate in the classroom and beyond (Noddings, 2012). This means working to promote the moral development of each student so that we each learn to listen and care for one another. As students witnessed my own attempts to listen and act on their expressed needs, I further encouraged them to think outside themselves and take note of the needs of those around them.

For instance, earlier that same school year, a student would regularly attend school on some of our coldest days without a jacket. Having noticed this need for warm apparel, I took it upon myself to raid my own closet and bring to class a couple of lightweight jackets. Students took notice and soon, our room housed a warm clothes box where students would donate hats, jackets, and scarves for those in need. As students found themselves without warm clothing, they would borrow from the community box.

Throughout the school year, students continued to find ways to meet the expressed needs of their classmates and community. Whether it was through a blanket drive for a local kindergarten class, a day of silence in honor of exploited children, or a pledge to kindness over the Christmas holiday break, students did what they could to meet the needs of others.

In viewing my interaction with Amelia through a Noddings' inspired lens of relational care, I am able to see how our views of care align. I was attentive to Amelia's needs, found myself motivated to meet her expressed needs, and provided an outlet for personal expression as well as a place to find the assistance she would need in speaking and learning. Amelia later demonstrated care had been received when she shared a poem of gratitude she wrote for me. As a middle level teacher, I find tremendous value within the caring transactions that take place daily within my classroom. It is this view of care that guides my own teaching practice.

### **Meeting Adolescent Needs through Relational Care**

Noddings' theory of relational care assists teachers in addressing the social, psychological, and educational needs of today's adolescent learners (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012). When experiencing relational care, students are more motivated to learn when they acquire a sense of confidence in their academic ability (Bandura, 1997; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998) and forge a positive relationship with the teacher (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; Ryan & Powelson, 1991).

Teachers who demonstrate relational care are more apt to meet the diverse needs of today's adolescent learners (Noddings, 2012). Demonstrating care in the classroom can assist students in furthering their motivation and academic engagement (Alder, 2002; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Garza, 2009; Noddings, 1992, 2012). As we listen to their expressed needs and strive to meet those needs, students can grow in their feelings of safety, trust, and belongingness (Garza,

2009). In this way, they will be more inclined to take academic risks and engage in pro-active academic and social behavior (Noddings, 2012).

By listening to Amelia and offering my classroom as a place of safety, she understood I cared about her situation. As a result, she took me up on my offer to assist her in catching up on her school work. She would frequent my classroom in the early morning hours and worked to improve her course grade. She knew she could confide in me and trust that I would listen.

### **Tradition to Innovation – Transitioning Relational Care to the Virtual Classroom**

Noddings' theory of relational care ethics promotes the idea that while care is a global need and moral obligation, such care extends to those who surround us on a personal level. She holds lesser hope for our ability to extend immediate care on a wider, global level. (Noddings, 1984, 2012). In other words, we are not capable of caring for those outside our personal context and connection as we are for those within our immediate vicinity. Although virtual teachers have the opportunity to interact with online learners within the technological context, it isn't often that we have the chance to encounter our students on a face-to-face level. Teachers cite a lack of personal connection with virtual learners as a key deficit to online instruction (Hawkins, Graham & Barbour, 2012). Virtual teachers must make the effort to establish a social presence and sense of immediacy to encourage student motivation and course success (Hawkins et al., 2012; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003). If this is the case, in what ways might relational care theory translate within the online classroom? It's possible that the spatial and time distance between teacher and student might hinder the forging and maintaining of relational care. In what ways can teachers establish a strong, intimate connection with students despite the apparent distance? As I transitioned from the brick-and-

mortar classroom into the world of online education, I found myself considering the role of relational education within the parameters of the virtual classroom.

### **Research Question**

It is my intention to share my own experiences as a novice online instructor attempting to establish an ethic of relational care with students enrolled in my virtual English I course. The question guiding my autoethnographic narrative research is:

- What is my lived experience as a novice, online, English I instructor attempting to enact relational care with my online learners?

### **Method of the Study**

Narrative inquiry seeks to understand the nature of experience through story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Autoethnography, or the study of self, is a form of narrative inquiry that allows the researcher the opportunity to act as participant within her own investigation. This research methodology provides the researcher opportunity to share her own memories and experiences as a means of understanding a greater cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Spry, 2001).

For this study, I want to encourage critical thought within myself as a novice online teacher engaged in daily interactions with my online learners. I want to grow in my own ability to care for my online students through critical self-analysis and consideration of my actions and disposition in terms of relational care. I also strive to share my story with fellow virtual teachers, educational leaders, and policy makers as we search for ways to effectively engage, motivate, and retain adolescent online learners. In my effort to accomplish this, I conducted an autoethnographic narrative inquiry as I shared my experiences as a novice virtual teacher. This

approach to research provides readers a rich, detailed examination of my experiences in a format that translates into the story-like structure of my daily-lived experiences.

Since entering the virtual classroom in March of 2013, I have maintained personal audio recorded journals that detail my experiences as an online teacher. The audio journal contains my perceptions of events within the classroom and in interacting with students, parents, and colleagues each week through the first year of my career as a virtual teacher. Journal entries include discussion of the events throughout the day or week, recollections of interactions with students and parents, personal frustrations or perceive accomplishments, worries and concerns regarding my job and role as a mother and wife, as well as questions and reflections concerning my place as an online teacher.

I utilized transcriptions of the audio recorded journal entries from my first year as a virtual English I teacher along with headnotes obtained through interpretive data analysis (Hatch, 2002) to identify aspects of and attempts at enacting relational care within my English I course. Interpretive analysis of the data provided a method of analysis that promoted the reading and interpretation of narrative data as a means of identifying personal interpretations of the text rather than searching for themes and risking a depersonalization of the text. After I conducted an interpretive analysis of the transcribed journal entries, I drafted interim texts that I shared with a response community of three online teachers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2002), and finally constructed three research narratives – one depicting my first day as an online teacher, the second occurring six months later, and the final narrative taking place a year after I entered the online classroom - that depicted my experiences enacting relational care within the virtual classroom. The final narratives maintained the integrity of the data while simultaneously

maintaining the anonymity of those who shared in my experiences through the use of character composites and fictitious plot lines (Clandinin & Connelly, 2002; Clough, 2002).

### **Significance of the Study**

A recent meta-analysis of the effectiveness of online instruction illustrates a greater number of studies concerning collegiate online learning, rather than virtual instruction at the secondary level (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). While recent studies have given attention to the teacher-student relationships in an online classroom (DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, & Preston, 2008; Murphy & Manzanares, 2008, 2009), as well as the need for teacher immediacy and presence in a virtual setting (Arbaugh, 2001; Mehrabian, 1971; Myers, Zhong, & Guan, 1998; Picciano, 2002), there is little in terms of relational care and its place within the K-12 virtual classroom (Velasquez, Graham, & Osguthorpe, 2013).

In fact, the only study I have uncovered that specifically relates to relational care in the virtual classroom is an interpretative phenomenological analysis designed to understand the participant experience and develop themes of care relevant to the online classroom context (Velasquez et al., 2013). In this case study of two teacher and four student cases, the two teachers were selected through purposeful sampling based on their demonstrated “exceptional caring attitudes in their practice as teachers in the online context” (p. 100). The students were selected by the teachers based on a personally noted “high quality” relationship – one male and one female student for each teacher. The researchers conducted interviews to understand each participants’ experience within the online classroom, and the caring experience and technology choices made to support caring interactions between the teacher and student. The study found themes pertaining to shared experience, continuous dialogue, vigilant observations, the

structuring of the learning environment, attending to individual student academic needs, well-being, and reaction (2013).

While Velasquez et al.'s (2013) study addresses the experience of relational care as noted between two caring teachers and the students with whom they feel they have a strong relationship, my study further fills the gap in relational care literature as I share my experiences in enacting relational care online. Unlike the study conducted by Velasquez et al (2013), my study offers a first-hand account of daily interactions with a diverse group of online learners in an attempt to demonstrate those things which further my ability to care, as well as those things which hinder my attempts at establishing relational care in the virtual school environment. As I share my personal stories of interaction in the virtual classroom, I also share my personal development as an online teacher, as well as my successes, and my struggles. I seek to engage the reader in a conversation regarding relational care in the online classroom. I crafted a final narrative text that I hope resonates with readers, opens them to consider the needs of today's adolescent virtual student, and leads to further investigation in the role of relational care theory in the virtual classroom.

### **Assumptions**

One of the assumptions guiding my inquiry is the premise that despite the transition from a brick-and-mortar learning environment to the virtual classroom, adolescent learners share the same need for relational education with an emphasis on care. This assumption is based on the theory underpinning this study's conceptual framework – relational care theory (Noddings, 2012).

It is also my assumption that virtual teachers can find a way to establish and maintain relational care with online learners within an asynchronous classroom environment. Although the

method by which we transmit this care will likely vary between the face-to-face instruction and the virtual instruction, it is my belief that we can find ways to effectively transmit care so that online learners are able to receive it.

Finally, it is my assumption that I am a teacher who believes in the power of relational care and fosters such care within my own classroom. Throughout the study, I operate under the presumption that I am a teacher who sets out to intentionally care for a diverse array of students. This assumption will guide my data analysis as I strive to identify my attempts to enact relational care with my virtual students.

### Timeline

The timeline for conducting and defending my autoethnographic narrative is noted in Figure 2 below.

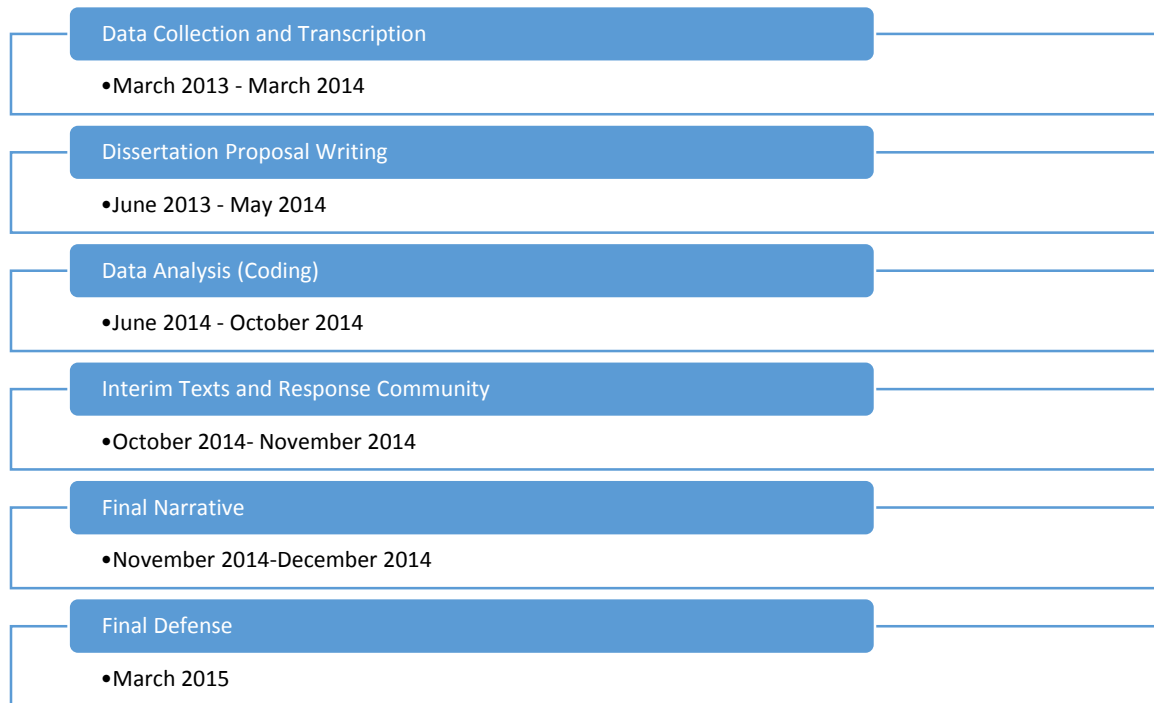


Figure 2. Timeline for my narrative autoethnographic inquiry.



## Definition of Terms

*Asynchronous Instruction*– Classroom instruction and communication that takes place outside synchronous time and space; a time lag between presentation of instructional material and student engagement or response (U.S. Department of Education, 2009)

*Blended Learning* - The combination of online and offline/face-to-face learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2009)

*Brick-and-mortar* – Traditional, face-to-face classroom setting

*English* – The pre-determined English content within an online public school system

*Full-Time Virtual Instruction* – A full-time online instructional alternative to attending a traditional school

*Online Education/ Virtual Education* – Synchronous or asynchronous teacher-led education that takes place over the Internet, with the teacher and student separated geographically (Evergreen Education Group, 2012)

*Online/Virtual Teacher* – A teacher who teaches in the context of an online classroom environment

*Part-Time Virtual Instruction* – Supplemental online instruction completed in conjunction with enrollment in a traditional school or homeschool program

*Relational Care* – A theory of care that focuses attention on the relation between the carer and the cared-for (Noddings, 2012).

*Synchronous Instruction* – Instruction that takes place between teacher and student in real-time (U.S. Department of Education, 2009)

## Summary

As teachers, it is our responsibility to meet the unique needs of our adolescent students. Relational care holds potential to provide a basis from which we have the opportunity to note the expressed needs of each child, reflect on each need, and take action to meet the need (Noddings, 2012). As a former brick-and-mortar teacher, I found the value in establishing relational care within my classroom. I was able to note myriad of ways in which relational care assisted my students in growing as learners. Now that I have transitioned from a master teacher to a novice teacher within the online context, I wonder if I will be able to demonstrate the same sense of relational care with my virtual students, as I once accomplished with students in the brick-and-mortar classroom. In this dissertation, I employed autoethnographic narrative inquiry to share my experiences as a virtual teacher attempting to enact relational care within the online classroom.

## CHAPTER TWO

My first week as a virtual teacher seemed to come and go in a whirlwind of phone calls, grading, and internal reflection. As a brick-and-mortar teacher, I found tremendous value in establishing a strong relationship with each of my students and in building a class community of care and respect. I noted the ways in which a caring relationship worked to enhance student motivation, engagement, and overall demeanor in the classroom. Now, here I was as a novice virtual teacher, finding myself in familiar, yet uncharted territory. While I was reminded of my first years in the traditional classroom, I was facing an entirely different context. I feared I would no longer be able to establish the caring relationships with students I valued within my brick and mortar classroom. I wondered how I would establish relational care with a potentially nameless, faceless student on the other side of the computer screen. Would I ever get to “know” them? Would they ever “know” me? Would I be able to identify and meet their needs the way in which I once did in the brick and mortar classroom? And, finally, would it matter?

### **Laying the Foundation for my Review of the Literature**

In this chapter, I introduce research focused on the growth of today’s virtual school student population along with the reasons today’s students are entering the virtual classroom and characteristics of successful online students. I then discuss the traits of a caring teacher and how such traits may translate to the “effective” online teacher in the form of social presence and immediacy. This leads me to a discussion of the teacher-student relationship within the virtual classroom and the need for a focus on relational care within online learning.

Figure 3 demonstrates the flow constructed by the following review of the literature.

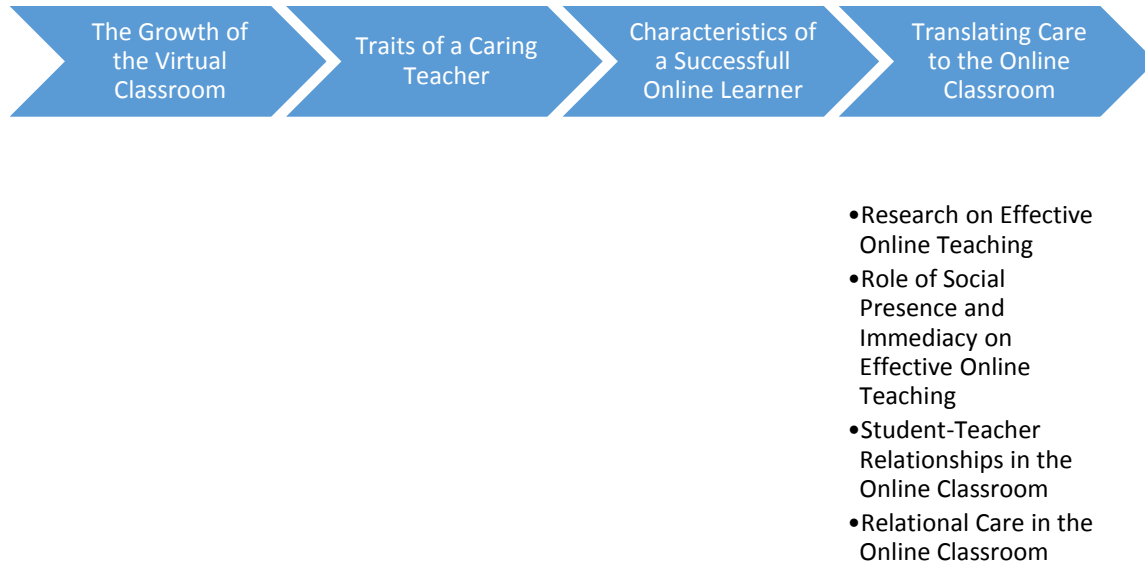


Figure 3. Flow of the literature review topics and studies.

## Literature Review

### The Growth of the Virtual Classroom

Virtual school is a phenomenon that is growing and expanding as the years pass. As of 2012, 31 states offer fully online, state-wide virtual schools or state-led distance learning. Two-thirds of U.S. school districts have had students enrolled in online or blended learning courses, and it is estimated that more than five percent of the K-12 population in the nation are currently taking part in online learning (Evergreen Education Group, 2012).

In 2011, Florida passed the “Digital Learning Act” which requires all students to take at least one virtual course as a high school graduation requirement. Florida statute 1003.48 states, “beginning with students entering grade 9 in the 2011-2012 school year, at least one course with the 24 credits required in this subsection must be completed through online learning” (Florida Legislature, 2013).

## Traits of a Caring Teacher

Over the years, researchers and educators have noted that caring is an important aspect of “good” teaching (Bosworth, 1995; Dillon, 1989; Noddings, 2012). An interpretive ethnographic study conducted by Dillon (1989) sought to understand how a single “effective” brick and mortar teacher established meaning with students during typical classroom interactions. Dillon conducted a year-long ethnographic study of a high school English-reading teacher. The teacher, a 38-year-old male from Rochester, New York, was noted by his administration and people outside the school setting to be “effective” in teaching a basic-track class of 17 juniors. Through field notes, interviews, and the investigation of secondary sources, Dillon discovered the teacher’s intents to know, understand, and incorporate the experiences of his remedial readers into his daily interactions with them defined his “effectiveness”. This teacher went out of his way to establish and maintain a strong, personal relationship with each of his students in an effort to cultivate a classroom that sparked student engagement and motivation. He visited student homes and took time to speak with community members. Students noted they would “act differently in his [Appleby’s] class – I guess because of the type of teacher he is...he makes sure that nobody makes fun of anybody if they mess up when they read out loud” (p. 241). Others stated the teacher was “fun” and would “help you when you feel bad”. In essence, this “effective teacher” worked to establish relationships – caring relationships – with his students as he listened, encouraged, and found ways to meet the needs of each child (Dillon, 1989).

A key aspect of Noddings’ (1984) relational care theory involves reciprocity. Without indication that the care has been received, the caring act is incomplete (Garza, 2009; Noddings, 2005). Though teachers may feel they are “caring” for their students, if the student does not

identify the act as care, it lacks true relational care. For this reason, it's important to understand how students view care and the traits they find in a caring teacher.

In an effort to understand student perceptions of care and caring teachers, Bosworth (1995) conducted a study of middle-level students. Teachers were asked to select what they believed to be the five “most caring” (students who demonstrate respectful, positive classroom behavior) and five “most uncaring” students (those who demonstrate negative or disrespectful classroom behavior) from their classroom to participate in the study. Bosworth then spent a year in two middle schools, interviewing more than 100 students from over 300 classrooms. Students were asked to share what they defined to be “care” and “caring teachers”. Findings demonstrate that middle-level students believe a teacher cares when s/he is helpful and demonstrates respect and kindness. A caring teacher was noted to be involved, polite, and concerned about the success of his students.

A study by Alder and Moulton (1998) examined what middle school suburban students believed to be a caring relationship with teachers. They found that students noted care when the teacher performed “good teaching,” took the time to listen and learn about their lives and experiences, and maintained strong classroom management. The students revealed their needs for a teacher who maintained control and worked to provide what they perceived to be quality instruction (1998).

In 2002, Alder expanded on her previous research and conducted an interpretive qualitative study of urban youth to examine the nature of caring relationships between a group of urban middle school students and their teachers. The researcher hoped to determine what the students perceived to be a “caring teacher” and understand how caring relationships are formed between urban middle school students and teachers. Participants were selected from two urban

schools located in a metropolitan city in the southeastern United States. At each of the school sites, the principal identified a teacher who s/he believed to be “particularly caring” (p.249).

Alder found that urban students identified a caring teacher as one who ran a tight ship. This teacher set high expectations and assisted students in meeting those expectations. She maintained control of the classroom and pushed students to succeed. Caring teachers were willing to answer student questions, teach to mastery, and utilized parental support to further limit disruptive behavior and encourage academic growth.

In 1999, Caldwell conducted a study of high school students in an effort to understand how individual secondary students interpret care in the classroom. Forty-one “average” students were selected by their school guidance counselors from four different schools (known under the pseudonyms of Vocational, Parochial, Urban, and Suburban) to participate in the study. “Average student” was defined by the researcher as a student whose schoolwork hovered around “C,” was not identified as having “special needs” and could “go unnoticed in the classroom” (p. 21).

Four themes emerged from Caldwell’s (1999) findings: student-oriented, work-oriented, engaged students, and active. Participants noted that a caring, student-oriented teacher demonstrates respect for all students and encourages all students to reach his full potential. Students also stated a caring teacher would adjust workloads and base classroom grades on more than tests and homework. Such a teacher modifies expectations to accommodate student needs and opinion. Finally, a caring teacher engages students, reflects on his/her practice, and exhibits a passion for learning. The caring teacher is not afraid to use humor in the classroom, engage in self-disclosure, and infuse interesting and entertaining coursework.

Garza (2009) took the examination of student perceptions of care a step further. Similarly to Alder and Moulton (1998) and Alder (2002), Garza wanted to examine care with attention to variation by student demographics. She focused on 49 Latino and 44 White high school students' perceptions of teacher care. She conducted a qualitative constant comparative analysis to identify the similarities and difference in the ways each group of students perceived care. She found that although all of the students noted five key themes in terms of care: (1) provide scaffolding during a teaching episode, (2) reflect a kind disposition, (3) always available to help students, (4) demonstrate a personal interest in student's well-being, and (5) provide affective academic support, the order in which the students demonstrated the significance of each theme varied. While the white students put greater emphasis on actions that reflect a kind disposition, the Latino students put the greatest emphasis on teachers who provide scaffolding during a teaching episode.

With attention to diverse populations, Cassidy and Bates (2005) and Pomeroy (1999) sought to understand the way in which students deemed "at-risk" or disengaged from school came to view "care" in the classroom. In a study of school committed to enacting an ethic of care, Cassidy and Bates (2005) provided voice to students, administrators, and teachers concerning the power of relational care for students identified as "drop-outs" or "push-outs" from the traditional school setting. Students in this study identified caring teachers as those who made them feel welcomed, acknowledged and understood them, respected them, helped them, and acted as a "friend". Students noted that caring teachers helped to improve their attitude toward school and learning, overcome personal emotional issues, enhance their perceptions of others, demonstrate care for their personal self, and afforded them the chance to see hope for the future.



In Pomeroy’s (1999) exploratory, qualitative study, students’ relationships with teachers surfaced as one of the most salient features within their educational experience. Findings from the student interviews demonstrate three key groups of students with relation to the perceived significance in their interactions with teachers as noted in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Role of Teacher Interaction in Overall School Experience*

Interactions with teachers were central to overall experience	Interactions with teachers one of several salient features central to the overall experience	Interactions with teachers play a peripheral role in overall experience
13 students	12 students	8 students

Despite the variation in the noted perspectives of teacher-student relationships, Pomeroy (1999) found student comments to be rather consistent. Students shared that they responded positively to teachers who sought to establish a positive student-teacher relationship and stepped out of their “formal” role of teacher into a friendly, pastoral role within their interactions. Overall, participants noted that a “good teacher” is one who worked to establish a meaningful relationship with students.

According to Noddings (2012), the first step in establishing an ethic of relational care is the carer’s attention towards the individual needs of the cared-for. Once this attention has been established, and the carer has recognized a need in the cared-for, the carer is motivated to action – finding ways to care and address the needs of the cared-for. Studies concerning student perceptions of care in the traditional classroom demonstrate similarities in student constructs of a “caring” teacher, while also noting the diversity that exists in student needs. While one student may seek a teacher who pushes her academically, another seeks a “friend” or confidant.

With the growing trend of online education, and increasing requirements for online learning in terms of high school graduation, it stands to reason that a diverse array of students are signing up and logging in to today's online courses. Within my course alone, I have instructed students ranging in age from 12 to 20, and enrolled in grades 8 through 12. I have also encountered students from a variety of cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, geographic locations, and home life situations. While some students have resided in their home, others have attended the course while simultaneously enrolled in a behavioral treatment facility, rehabilitation facility, or detention facility. Students have attended the course for a myriad of reasons such as credit recovery, personal needs-based instruction (e.g. hospital or homebound students), as an attempt to graduate early, to receive honors credit, or as support for homeschool instruction. With such diversity comes variety in terms of educational and personal needs.

Successful online learners demonstrate characteristics that not all adolescent learners possess. In what ways does this translate for online teachers who hope to effectively meet the needs of today's growing body of virtual students? Relational care provides teachers the opportunity to meet students where they are, and address their personal needs in ways that encourage personal, social, and educational growth (Noddings, 2012). Given the growing diversity of today's online learners, and problems related to attrition on online students, relational care can provide online teachers the means of establishing connection conducive to online learning success. But, in what ways does "care" translate into the online classroom?

### **Characteristics of a Successful Online Learner**

Students today participate in virtual education for myriad of reasons. Whether it is to provide a flexible schedule (Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess & Blomeyer, 2004), opportunity for course advancement or credit recovery, afford opportunity for at-risk students (Repetto,

Cavanaugh, Wayer, & Liu, 2010), or simply out of obligation to satisfy a graduation requirement, more and more adolescent learners are turning to the online classroom to suit their educational objective (Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Hawkins, Graham, & Barbour, 2012). Yet, research suggests problems related to attrition of online learners (Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, & Pape, 2008) Studies suggest adolescents often lack the self-discipline, internal motivation, and self-regulation necessary for successful completion of an online course (Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Hartley & Bendixon, 2001). Therefore, virtual education runs the risk of high levels of attrition in the K-12 online classroom.

Over the years, research has emerged to investigate the causes of student attrition within the online K-12 environment. Some studies point to learner characteristics (Hartley & Bendixen, 2001; Roblyer et al., 2008), while others have found the learning environment and online teacher to be an important factor in terms of course completion (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008; Picciano, 2002; Song, Singleton, Hill & Koh, 2004; Volery, 2001).

In search of a model for predicting student online success, Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, and Pape (2008) conducted a study to measure the relation between a variety of student and environmental factors identified by previous research and successful course completion during one semester at the Virtual High School Global Consortium (VHS) – a collaboration of over 400 high schools in 28 states and 23 countries. They wanted to know if any measure of student cognitive and background characteristics can predict the success or failure of online high school students. The researchers utilized a revised version of the *Educational Success Prediction Instrument (ESPRI)*, a sixty-item Likert scale instrument designed to measure variables contributing to dropout and failure rates of online learners. 2,880 students completed most or all of the survey. Students who completed the course with an A, B, or C were deemed “successful”

completers. With this as the passing criteria, 1,994 of the participants successfully completed their online course. The study findings suggest a combination of student factors and learning conditions work to predict success of online high school students – student self-efficacy, achievement beliefs, instructional risk-taking, and organization strategies were all important factors related to student success. But what about those learners who lack the traits deemed necessary for success within the online classroom? What happens to them?

Hartley and Bendixen (2001) expand on the role of learner characteristics in successful online learning by examining the importance of epistemological beliefs and self-regulatory skills. They suggest that certain epistemological beliefs may limit opportunities to learn as learners are afforded a greater opportunity to control their own learning and in turn their determination in what technology they will use, and what they will neglect. Students who already struggle with learning within the brick-and-mortar setting may suffer when placed in learning situations that call for greater autonomy and independence. However, students such as this who reside in states where online learning is a requirement for high school graduation (Florida Legislature, 2013), are expected to successfully navigate an online course often outside of the traditional school environment. Learners who maintain a limited repertoire of learning strategies will often struggle when faced with such independent learning. In addition, some students may find difficulty in navigating the nonlinear and multidimensional nature of online learning (Hartley & Bendixen, 2001). Relational care calls for classroom instruction designed to address the individual, expressed needs of each child. We know that students who are deemed “at-risk” and those who are “pushed out” of traditional schools have reached success when teachers respond with relational care (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Pomeroy, 1999). Perhaps utilizing such care in the online classroom can promote positive outcomes for students who lack the characteristics deemed

necessary for successful online learning, thereby lowering attrition and increasing the graduation rate.

## **Translating Care in the Online Classroom**

### **Research on effective online teaching.**

In some ways, what makes an individual an effective instructor in the brick and mortar environment will often lead them to be an effective online instructor. However, teachers may find themselves striving to make specific adaptations to their current role, or instruction, in order to effectively serve their distance learning students (Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2001; DiPietro et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2012; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009). The online teacher must hone skills that provide an effective intersection for pedagogy, technology, and course content. This “new form of pedagogy” is growing, despite limitations in existing research on preparing educators to meet the demands of online teaching (DiPietro et al, 2008).

Studies by Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter (2001), and DiPietro, Ferdib, Black, and Preston (2008) sought to understand the changing role of today’s teachers and what it means to be “effective” in terms of the online classroom. Coppola et al. (2001) conducted 20 semi-structured interviews from 1998 to 1999 with 20 faculty members at the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) to gain insight into their experiences creating and delivering courses using Asynchronous Learning Network (ALN). They found that in any environment, teachers must maintain three key roles – cognitive, affective, and managerial. They concluded that the affective role of online teachers requires they find new ways to express emotion. For instance, teachers must find ways to utilize paralanguage, or features outside traditional formal syntax, to convey feeling. They also found that this new teaching role requires teachers to take on a stronger managerial role, giving more attention to detail, structure, and regular monitoring of student

progress. In terms of relational care, students identify caring teachers as those who take an interest in their lives (Alder & Moulton, 1998; Bosworth, 1995; Cassidy & Bates, 2005) demonstrate a sense of humor (Caldwell, 1999), and provide assistance with coursework (Alder, 2002; Caldwell, 1999; Garza, 2009). When it comes to online instruction, caring teachers would require a shift in the manner in which they express their sense of humor and understanding, and also reach out to manage, or monitor student academic needs and growth.

While Coppola et al. (2002) focused on instructors of higher education, DiPietro et al. (2008) utilized grounded theory in an effort to identify best practices in secondary virtual teaching. The researchers used purposeful sampling method to identify 16 successful virtual teachers from Michigan Virtual School. Specifically, the researchers wanted teachers who demonstrated a history of being active in the course, maintained effective communication with their students, and utilized instructional strategies that resulted in student success.

Similar to the findings suggested by Coppola et al. (2001), DiPietro et al. (2008) found that “effective” virtual school teachers demonstrated strong managerial and communication skills if they hoped to establish an online presence and keep their students from being “lost” or forgotten. Essentially, they were required to give more attention to detail, structure, and regular monitoring of student progress and participation. Participants reported the need for a strong teacher presence in order to maintain student motivation. They noted efforts to learn about their students and establish strong relationships by providing prompt, personalized feedback, engaging in discussion board conversations with students, and monitoring student progress throughout the course. Participants also mentioned their efforts to provide a variety of assessments and assignments that prompted personal connection and incorporated student interests into the coursework. While the study did not address the issue of reciprocity, it did demonstrate the need

for online teachers to demonstrate elements of relational care to meet the needs of their online learners. Teachers must give attention to the needs of online learners and adapt their pedagogy to meet those needs through student monitoring, feedback, and course engagement.

Coppola et al. (2002) and DiPietro et al.'s (2008) work demonstrates that effective online teachers strive to motivate learners. Students who lack internal motivation can often be lost or forgotten in the online classroom. Seizing upon this need for student motivation in the online environment, Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2009) conducted a qualitative study of 42 online teachers from Canada in an effort to understand teacher perceptions of student motivation within the secondary online classroom. The researchers identified three main categories related to teacher perceptions of student motivation within the virtual classroom. Included within the three categories was attention to communication, interaction, and social presence, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, and learner-centered designs. Table 2 illustrates the categories and sub-categories noted by the researchers.

Table 2

*Categories of Teacher Perspectives on Motivation (Murphy et al., 2009)*

Communication, Interaction, and Social Presence	Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivators	Learner-Centered Designs
1. Personal Relationships	1. Tracking, Checking, and Monitoring	1. Engaging Designs
2. Humor	2. Carrots on Sticks	2. Pace of Learning
3. Tone of Voice	3. Self-motivation	
4. Face-to-face Meetings	4. Support of others	
5. Teacher Feedback	5. Encouragement	
6. Teacher-initiated Communication		

Table 2 Continued

7. Student-initiated Communication		
8. Student Comments		
9. Interaction and Discussion		

Just as the students in Cassidy and Bates' (2005) study noted the way in which caring teachers encouraged them through positive communication, feedback, personal relationships, and engaging activities, participants in Murphy et al.'s (2009) study demonstrated the projection of a positive social presence with students through similar means. Tone in both verbal and written communication, the use of humor, self-disclosure, and selective word choice in student performance feedback were all important attributes in maintaining student motivation in the course. In addition, teachers in Murphy et al.'s study found it necessary to rely on forms of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to further encourage high school student motivation within the virtual setting. This category "pointed towards strategies that might potentially include building a more personal relation between teacher and student" (p. 15). Just as the cultivation of a personal – often friendly – relationship with teachers assisted at-risk students in Cassidy and Bates' (2005) study, such relationships can assist online learners in finding personal motivation and ultimately online learning success.

**Role of social presence and immediacy on effective teaching.**

'Social presence' has been described as "the ability of participants...to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 89). In terms of online learning, presence has been characterized as the student's sense of being in or belonging to a class (Picciano, 2002). Social presence provides instructors the opportunity to note student need



and respond – a key aspect of implementing and maintaining a relational care with adolescent learners. Unlike a traditional setting which provides teachers opportunity for immediate feedback in the form of facial expressions and body language, virtual educators have demonstrated a more difficult time determining a student’s immediate need or emotion (Hawkins et al., 2012). Communicating a social presence online is challenging, but essential if we hope to care for our online learners. It is essential to identifying the expressed needs of our students.

‘Immediacy’ is another important construct in terms of meeting the individual needs of online students. It is noted to reference the ‘psychological distance between communicators’ (Weiner & Mehrabian, 1968). In a traditional, brick-and-mortar classroom environment, immediacy takes the form of nonverbal and verbal cues. For instance, nonverbal behaviors may take the form of eye contact, classroom movement, smiling, and body language. Verbal indicators include the use of humor, feedback, addressing others by name, and personal disclosure (Arbaugh, 2001). Research demonstrates that teacher immediacy and presence are strong predictors of student learning and motivation (Arbaugh, 2001; Picciano, 2002), as well as perceived course satisfaction (Arbaugh, 2001; Mulcahy, Dibbon, & Norberg, 2008; Richardson & Swan, 2003).

A study conducted by Picciano (2002) sought to examine student performance in an online course in relation to student interaction and sense of presence. Picciano utilized descriptive analysis of interaction, presence, and performance data in a completely asynchronous graduate course at Hunter College. Throughout the duration of the course, the teacher utilized techniques to encourage social presence and a sense of community. Techniques included complimenting students, self-disclosure on the part of the instructor, warmth, and an assortment of activities designed to build and sustain group commitment. Results of the study demonstrate a

strong relationship among student perceptions of interaction, social presence, and learning. In other words, when the students perceived greater interaction and presence from the teacher, they felt they were able to learn more from the course. In terms of relational care, this study reveals that traits of a caring teacher, such as self-disclosure (Caldwell, 1999) and a willingness to listen (Alder & Moulton, 1998; Dillon, 1989; Garza, 2009), provide online learners a greater sense of confidence in their learning abilities – a noted need for today’s online students (Hartley & Bendixen, 2001; Roblyer et al., 2008).

Similar to Picciano’s (2002) focus on social presence and its relationship to perceived learning, Richardson and Swan (2003) also explored the role of social presence online and its relationship to student perceptions of learning. However, they took things a step further by looking at the role of social presence and student satisfaction with the course instructor. The researchers hypothesized that the students’ perception of social presence was related to his perceived learning and satisfaction with the teacher.

Upon analyzing the results of an end of semester survey completed by 97 students enrolled in an Empire State College’s online course, Richardson and Swan (2003) discovered that students who reported higher perceived social presence also perceived that they learned more from the course than those with lower social presence scores. The researchers also noted that students who demonstrated the highest level of satisfaction with their online teacher believed they learned more from the course. Finally, they found that students with a high overall social presence score indicated they were highly satisfied with their online teacher. In essence, the more satisfied the students were with the teacher and the social presence established in the course, the more confident they were in their course abilities. While the study focused solely on student perceptions of learning rather than actual learning within the course, the research demonstrates

the value of social presence and instructor contact in achieving confidence within virtual students. In this way, teachers who care – those who take the time to establish themselves in the course in such a way that they provide a sense of social presence – can also work to establish and maintain the confidence of virtual students.

Social presence plays a key role in establishing and maintaining student confidence within the online environment (Richardson & Swan, 2003). However, research has also found a strong tie between immediacy and student motivation. Wilson (2006) sought to examine the role of immediacy in an online learning environment. He utilized data from a prior study to determine the role of immediacy in student motivation, classroom performance, and attitude. In the original study, 1,572 students from 61 undergraduate courses in a liberal arts university in the Southeast completed a survey to evaluate their course instructor. For this study, he focused on response statements regarding student perceived motivation, concern demonstrated by the instructor, overall course rating, student attitude toward the professor, and how often they believed the instructor demonstrated a positive attitude toward the students and wanted to see them succeed. Students' ratings of their instructor's attitude toward them interpreted 58 percent of the variability regarding motivation in the course. The extent to which the participants enjoyed the course correlated with their perceptions of the instructors' attitude. This accounted for 42 percent of the students' appreciation for the course. Overall, a large percentage of the variability in motivation and attitude was explained by the students' perceptions of their instructor's attitude toward the students. Wilson concluded that “communicating a positive attitude toward students predicts their motivation, performance, and attitudes.” (p. 93).

A caring teacher is one who takes the time to listen and know her students (Noddings, 2012). She demonstrates a belief that her students are capable of success, and challenges them to

excel (Alder, 2002; Caldwell, 1999). When students feel their teacher cares, they are more inclined to have faith in themselves, care for themselves, and push themselves to achieve (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). As Wilson (2006) noted in his study of teacher immediacy and student attitudes, teachers who generate a “can-do” attitude, are more likely to motivate students towards success within an online environment. Immediacy behaviors provide online teachers the opportunity to care - to get to know their students and in turn demonstrate relational care in the virtual classroom.

Teacher immediacy and presence are essential components to clear communication in the classroom; yet, communication becomes difficult when students fail to associate a face with their virtual teacher. Just as teachers feed off of the visual cues enacted by their students, students will respond to the affective cues initiated by the teacher (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009). With regards to student perceptions of their relationships with teachers, Mulcahy, Dibbon, and Norberg (2008) found that virtual high school students often missed the social interactions that were typical with their brick-and-mortar teachers. In a qualitative study of students in three rural high schools in a Canadian province, struggling students noted how they would frequently turn to their traditional classroom teachers – or their “real teachers” – for guidance and support. Rather than feeling a bond with their virtual educators, students reported how they often felt too intimidated to approach their online teachers with personal concerns and questions. As an online teacher concerned with the role of relational care in the virtual classroom, I worry that a failure to establish a sense of immediacy and presence will further hinder my ability to truly care for my online students. I want my students to feel as though they know me – that I am “real” and that they can come to me for assistance in reaching success in the course. As the research demonstrates, immediacy and presence can work to further motivate and challenge students to

succeed online (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Wilson, 2006). They can also work to put a face with the name on the other side of the computer screen, a sense of personality with a voice on the other end of the phone, and in turn, develop a connection between teacher and student.

### **Student-teacher relationships in the online classroom.**

No matter the contextual setting, research demonstrates a need for teachers to establish relationships with their adolescent students (Alder, 2002; Alder & Moulton, 1998; Bosworth, 1995; Dillon, 1989; DiPietro et al., 2008; Goodenow, 1993; Mulcahy, Dibbon, & Norberg, 2008). Studies show the value in strong teacher-student interaction with regards to student success within the virtual learning environment (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009). Strong student-teacher relationships have been shown to increase student motivation (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009) and successful completion of virtual courses (Hawkins, Graham, Sudweeks, & Barbour, 2013). Students need to know there is a person behind the computer screen as “personal contact makes students feel like they own the material and they feel less isolated” (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009, p. 8). Teachers need to establish a social presence with their virtual learners to encourage learning, engagement, and satisfaction.

In coupling social presence and immediacy, online teachers can strive to cultivate a relationship with online learners. In terms of caring relations, the carer must find ways to listen and address the expressed needs of the cared-for (Noddings, 2012). Teacher presence and immediacy, or communication behaviors that reduce the social and psychological distance between teacher and student (Mehrabian, 1971; Myers et al., 1998), are strongly linked to the establishment of such relationships online (Velasquez et al., 2013).

Similar to the studies previously noted on immediacy and social presence Swan (2001) conducted an empirical investigation to examine factors affecting student satisfaction and perceived learning in an asynchronous online course. She utilized data collected from 73 asynchronous, online course offerings through the State University of New York Learning Network. For this study, Swan used a student survey consisting of multiple choice questions eliciting information from 1,406 students concerning student satisfaction with the course, perceived learning, and activity in the course along with opportunity to provide open-ended comments regarding the course.

Swan (2001) found that three factors were significantly related to student perceptions of satisfaction and learning – clarity and consistency in course design, contact with and feedback from the course instructor, and the cultivation of active course discussion. Correlation analyses demonstrated a significant relationship between the interactions students believed they had with instructors, satisfaction with the course, and perceived learning. Students who reported low levels of interaction with instructors also reported low levels of satisfaction and learning in the course. Communication, a key aspect to a solid teacher-student relationship, played an integral role in student satisfaction and perceived learning. The stronger the line of communication and teacher-student interaction, the more likely students seemed to be highly satisfied with the course and learning experience.

In a case study designed to focus on the nature of such student-teacher interactions, Hawkins et al. (2012) interviewed eight online educators at Utah Electronic High School to investigate the nature of their teacher-student interactions within an asynchronous, self-paced, statewide, supplemental virtual high school. Participants were selected through the use of intensity sampling, similar to extreme case sampling, in an effort to gather rich samples of the

phenomena under study. Teachers were selected to participate based on their noted student completion data between February 2008 and January 2009. Researchers conducted eight semi-structured telephone interviews with teachers selected from the top 30 percent and bottom 30 percent of course completion rates. In the discussion of their findings, researchers reported a disconnect that exists between the teachers and students. The participants noted the absence of physical cues and instantaneous feedback as obstacles to forming necessary relationships with their students. The teachers had trouble feeling as if they really knew their students and for this reason struggled in building necessary rapport. In other words, the lack of immediacy and presence caused a disconnect in terms of establishing a relationship with online learners. As such a relationship is necessary for relational care, it leads me to question how such care can be established in such an environment.

Research demonstrates the difficulty that lies in establishing a strong teacher-student relationship when separated by time and space (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009). Although such relationships are important in motivating online learners, they are not easy to achieve. In the aforementioned case study by Hawkins et al. (2012), the researchers note that, unlike a traditional class setting in which a variety of organic interactions between the teacher and students takes place on a daily basis, the majority of virtual teacher-student interactions are intellectual-instructional in nature taking the form of grading and responding to instructional questions. Procedural interactions – or interactions focused on managing and maneuvering instructional technology – were second in noted frequency, leaving social interactions a distant third. Participants mentioned how their limited social interaction with students often took the form of personal comments on student work or emails of encouragement. Outside of a single “getting to know you” assignment, and a teacher online biography, participants felt limited in

their time and ability to get to know the “nameless,” “faceless” students on their course roster. Unlike the spontaneous interactions that take place within the brick-and-mortar classroom, online interactions are typically “premeditated” or “consciously promoted” (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009).

Hawkins later returned to Utah’s Electronic High School, along with Graham, Sudweeks and Barbour (2013), to learn more about the student-teacher relationship in an online classroom. For this study, the researchers wanted to examine the relationship between teacher-student interaction and the student’s academic performance and course completion. Hawkins et al. (2013) utilized correlation and HLM research methods to address the question, “What is the relationship between students’ perceptions of the quality and frequency of teacher-student interaction and online course completion and academic performance”.

The researchers surveyed 2,269 students regarding their perceptions of the frequency and quality of their interactions with teachers. Results of the study demonstrate that the perceived quality and quantity of student interaction mattered to student course completion. A higher quality and frequency of interaction increased the odds the student would successfully complete the course. Perhaps the increase in student-teacher interactions provided online teachers greater opportunity to address the individual needs of each student, thereby increasing the student’s opportunity for success.

Supportive interactions between teacher and student are characterized as interactions that offer support, encouragement, and perceptions of immediacy and connectedness. Such interactions can work to assist teachers in cultivating a strong teacher-student relationship as teachers work to nurture, encourage, motivate, and retain online learners.



A strong, positive student-teacher relationship can have a positive effect on student motivation, values, and sense of self-efficacy, all necessary components for successful completion of online coursework (Hartley & Bendixen, 2001; Roblyer et al., 2008; Velasquez et al., 2013). In particular, a caring relationship provides teachers the opportunity to meet the individual needs of adolescent students as teachers take time to listen, reflect, and act on the student's expressed needs (Noddings, 2008; Velasquez et al., 2013). In this way, the learning environment becomes one in which the teacher reaches out to assist students right where they are. Such a relationship can do wonders for enhancing student motivation and academic engagement (Noddings, 1992; Velasquez et al., 2013).

### **Relational care in the online classroom.**

While the research points to the importance in establishing a strong teacher-student relationship within a virtual class setting (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009; Pomeroy, 1999), and the need for teacher presence and immediacy in distance learning education (Arbaugh, 2001; Picciano, 2002; Swan, 2001; Volery, 2001) it is my aim to take research a step further by investigating ways in which virtual teachers can establish and maintain relational care within the virtual learning experience. A lack of caring student-teacher relationships in the online classroom has been noted to contribute to a high attrition rate of online learners (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004).

Research in the field has addressed the need for a strong teacher-student relationships within the virtual setting and has sought to identify ways in which teachers seek to establish this relationship (DiPietro et al., 2008; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009). Yet, research which pertains specifically to the ethic of relational care in virtual learning is lacking. In fact,

over the course of my literature review, I found only a single study focused specifically on relational care in the virtual class setting.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis conducted by Velasquez, Graham, and Osguthorpe (2013) investigated virtual teacher and distance learning student perceptions of caring pedagogy within an online high school. The researchers utilized Nodding's relational care theory as a theoretical foundation to identifying and understanding the ways in which today's teachers and adolescent students experience care in an online environment. They used purposive sampling to select two Open High School of Utah teachers noted to develop strong relationships by school administration as research participants. The teachers then selected four students (two boys and two girls) who they believed had a strong student-teacher relationship within the course as the final research participants. Researchers interviewed participants three times over the course of nine months.

Findings indicated specific themes emerged relating to online care. Such themes included shared experience, continuous dialogue, vigilant observation, structuring learning environment, attending to students' individual academic needs, attending to student's well-being, and student reaction. Shared experience focused on the teacher's ability to be "present" at the time of student engagement in the course, whether this took the form of immediate teacher availability, or teacher-led assistance as the student encountered a lesson or assignment. Continuous dialogue referred to the teacher's ability to maintain regular connection with the student, and non-judgmental receptivity, and vigilant observation was noted as the teacher's ability to maintain an informed view of student progress in the course. The "caring" teachers within the study also demonstrated relational care as they structured the learning environment to meet individual student needs, attended to those individual academic needs, and strived to attend to the student's

overall health and well-being. Students demonstrated their reception of relational care through demonstration of gratitude or simply putting in demonstrated effort in the course.

Teachers within Velasquez et al.'s (2013) study noted their ability to view and assist students as "individuals" rather than as a "class" unit. Noted challenges to care included a lack of resources, time, and motivation. Researchers found that teachers may be limited in their ability to demonstrate technology-mediated care when they fail to connect well with students, or the student fails to work or respond to the teacher's attempts at contact. Teachers may also struggle in demonstrating care when they struggle to find a strong work-life balance.

While Velasquez et al.'s (2013) study provides insight into relational care in the online classroom by examining the relationship between two caring teachers and four of their students, it does so with the intention of identifying those aspects of online pedagogy that further the caring relationship. Students were purposefully selected by the teacher based on a noted strength in the teacher-student relationship. My autoethnographic narrative inquiry will provide further insight into establishing relational care as I share narratives regarding a wide array of secondary, online learners. In sharing my own stories, I hope to further current research related to the establishment and maintaining of relational care in the virtual classroom. What promotes a successful caring relationship, and just as importantly, what hinders such a relationship?

### **Summary**

Researchers and educators want to understand what it means to be an effective online instructor and how effective online instruction differs from effective teaching within a traditional classroom (Coppola et al., 2001; DiPietro et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2012). As virtual learning continues to grow across the nation, this field of research continues to flourish – specifically, research aimed at understanding and explaining the role of the teacher within a virtual classroom

(Coppola et al, 2001; DiPietro et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2012; Lai & Pratt, 2009; Volery, 2001) research focused on the teacher-student relationship (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009; Pomeroy, 1999; Richardson & Swan, 2003) and research that examines the impact of teacher immediacy and presence on student learning (Arbaugh, 2001; Picciano, 2002; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004; Swan, 2001; Wilson, 2006).

Many students today are turning to the world of virtual education for a myriad of reasons (Hawkins et al., 2012; Repetto et al., 2010). Online instructors are encountering students from a variety of backgrounds, lifestyles, and cognitive abilities. Research demonstrates the value of fostering a caring teacher-student relationship in encouraging student motivation, engagement, and learning. Yet, I wonder how this might translate in the virtual setting? Can a virtual teacher, such as myself, demonstrate relational care with online learners?

Over the years, research into online learning has flourished, with a primary focus on examining the role of the online teacher (Hawkins et al., 2012; Lai & Pratt, 2009; Volery, 2001), identifying ways to be an effective online teacher (Coppola et al., 2001; DiPietro et al., 2008), and understanding the student-teacher relationship with attention to social presence and immediacy in the online context (Arbaugh, 20001; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009; Picciano, 2002; Pomeroy, 1999; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Song et al., 2004; Swan, 2001). Relational care within the online classroom infuses the components of social presence and immediacy as teachers work to identify student needs, consider those needs, and find ways to address them within an online platform.

## CHAPTER THREE

Science fair projects - I absolutely *detested* them as a child. Even today I can recall the sense of anxiety that would build inside of me as I spent evenings at home, working on one project or another in preparation for our school's annual competition. I always had trouble identifying a "good" hypothesis. All too often, my teacher would note that my ideas simply wouldn't work. I couldn't possibly apply scientific method to the questions that gripped my curiosity. *Why do we love our pets so much? Why do parents get divorced? What is it like to be a teacher?* Rather, I had to rely on experiments that I could deduce to a hypothesis, set of variables, sequential steps, photographs (to make the display pretty), and conclusions. I had to write in a specific, prescribed way. I had to follow my teacher's example, and be sure to decorate my board with an interesting title. Even from a young age, I was ready to battle the entire notion that science equated to nothing more than a prescribed method of experimentation.

### **Taking a Narrative Turn in Educational Research**

If you were to ask me, "What is research?" just a few short years ago, it is likely my answer would have reflected a very post positivist point of view. I always assumed "research" was the study of a definitive hypothesis using very strict methods and variables. And why wouldn't I think this way? After all, my prior education taught me to respect numbers, statistics, and measureable data. From the time I was a young child, to the time I completed my Master's degree in Education, research equated to the scientific method. I focused on the search for truth through precise method – a post-positivist approach to research that surfaced from a version of logical positivism, an ideology that stemmed from the Venetian Circle and continued on until the

mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This once prominent philosophical belief system worked to draw a definitive line between science and non-science. It detailed that only verifiable statements were worthy of acknowledgement within the realm of science and research. It was the job of empiricism and scientific method to establish truths in research (Paul, 2005).

Logical positivism continued to dominate educational research until the mid-twentieth century, when researchers began to seek new epistemological, axiological, and ontological ways of viewing the world and conducting social science research. One theory that emerged from the fall of logical positivism became known as “post-positivism”. This particular philosophy held tight to some remnants of logical positivism – such as a failure to address the metaphysical within social science research and a desire for empirical evidence in research (Paul, 2005). Even today, educational researchers who adopt the post-positivist view remain focused on a need for rigorous method to produce trustworthy results (Anderson, 1979; Atkinson, 1997; Berg & Lune, 2008; Paul, 2005).

The post-modernists of the 1980s began to search for greater meaning and personal value within educational studies (Bochner, 1997; Hayano, 1979; Paul, 2005). Researchers began to question a search for “absolute truth” as they believed that all research filtered through language (Bochner, 1997; Bruner, 1990). In this way, there was no way to ever truly separate the research from the researcher – the knowledge from the knower, thereby rendering attempts at complete objectivity futile (Bochner 2012; Bruner, 1990; Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Frank, 2000; Paul, 2005).

Narrative – or Interpretivism – focused on ethics over method (Frank, 2000). Theorists who followed this turn towards narrative within educational research gave attention to meaning and morality over method and neutrality (Bochner, 1997, 2012; Bruner, 1990; Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Research became a conversation aimed at stimulating

personal reflection within the researcher, rather than the technical, rigid, scientific focus of the past (Ellis et al., 2011). Now, *this* was something I could understand. In learning about more post-modernist and interpretivist views of research, I was able to see a much clearer reflection of my own beliefs and values in educational research. How could we possibly remain “objective” in a world filtered through language and story? It wasn’t that my childhood questions were “invalid” in terms of scientific research. Rather, they were simply formulated through an interpretivist view of the world, as opposed to the positivist lens respected within my formal, elementary education.

## **Method**

### **Narrative as Research**

In the 1980s, writers in human sciences advocated a transition from the formulaic research of the past, toward narrative inquiry (Hayano, 1979; Sarbin, 1986). Narrative inquiry offered a turn away from the rationalistic, mechanical views of science as researchers focused on stories and how they generate meaning and manage identity (Bochner, 2012; Bruner, 1990). This research method is described as “the description and restorying of the narrative structure of varieties of educational experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 2). This form of research draws on Dewey’s view of experience as both personal and social (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In essence, to study education is to study experience, and to study experience is to study life (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). Rather than search for a “literal truth,” narrative inquiry seeks out “emotional, dialogic, and collaborative truths” (Bochner, 2012, p. 161).

As human beings, we live our lives through story. We experience, understand, and translate the world through narrative. Narrative inquiry provides the researcher opportunity to represent and understand lived experience. “Experience is what we study, and we study it

narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 18). While a traditional view of research attempts to suppress the subjective response of the researcher, narrative inquiry embraces the true “messiness” of method (Clough, 2002). Rather than remaining a spectator in the field, narrative researchers become agents and participants within the study itself. We embrace the subjectivity of life, and eliminate a false sense of complete objectivity. We understand that the world is mediated through language (Bochner, 1997). As a result, we can never truly separate ourselves from the research in which we partake (Clough, 2002). And so, we embrace our role within the research, and work within what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space – personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation)” (p. 50).

### **Autoethnography**

In the early 1990s, Ellis and Bochner worked to engage researchers in the consideration of self within social science research. This new ethnography – or autoethnography – provided researchers opportunity to embrace the subjectivity of social science research rather than strive for objectivity (Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Ellis et al., 2011). While all narrative inquiries are strongly autobiographical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the purpose of autoethnography is to allow the researcher to share his personal experience as a means of contributing to a greater cultural encounter (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography is aimed to stimulate and connect with the reader in an attempt to better understand ourselves, our experiences, and our world. So often, as social science researchers, we strive to extract “truth” and attain our data through the words of our participants. We develop our research questions, identify our willing participants, and ask such questions as to gain a clear picture of the phenomenon or topic under investigation. We rely



on others to share their truths, reveal their experience, and confide in us with their stories. Yet, for some reason, we often fail to extract, or trust, the stories found within our own lived experience. We expose the secrets of others, but fail to elicit our own personal vulnerability (Leavy, 2009).

Autoethnography, or the study of self, resides in a wide variety of literatures, such as fiction, poetry, memoir, plays, essay, and autobiography (Leavy, 2009; Neuman, 1996; Spry, 2001). This methodology views the researcher as a source of valuable data and requires vulnerability on the part of the researcher (Leavy, 2009). It serves as an approach to narrative inquiry that utilizes the researcher's personal experiences in understanding a greater cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011; Sparks, 2000; Spry, 2001).

Autoethnography values the experiences of the researcher as a means of reaching the reader through the sharing of ideas and moments often taken for granted and therefore overlooked. She analyzes her personal experience with the intention of illustrating a characteristic of the broader cultural experience she may connect and share with others (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

### **Rationale for Method**

I selected autoethnography, a personal form of narrative inquiry, for this study because I want to get at the very essence of my experience as a novice virtual teacher. Just as the “Postmodernists believe that the methods and procedures that are employed in research are ultimately and inextricably tied to the values and subjectivities of the researcher” (Wall, 2008, p. 42), so I believe that this particular methodology follows my own values and beliefs regarding the role narrative plays in our everyday life. Narrative inquiry is the study of experience – of life. Rather than simply seek to understand the phenomena of “relational care” within the virtual

classroom, I hope to enter into and submerge myself within the phenomena – I want to partake of it (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). My objective is to offer a first-hand account of my experiences within the virtual classroom as I come into my own understanding of “relational care” within the virtual classroom. The autoethnographic approach to this narrative inquiry will promote personal reflection and vulnerability as I expose my thoughts, feelings, and experiences from the virtual classroom. It will allow me the opportunity to at once, engage in living, telling, retelling and reliving personal stories of relational care in the virtual classroom (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). I hope to communicate to the reader, engage in meaningful dialogue, and promote thought concerning these experiences and their place within the broader, cultural role of relational care ethics within the virtual classroom. How might *my* experiences speak to *you*? My goal is to engage the reader and perhaps promote thoughtful consideration regarding the potential rewards, and challenges of relational care ethics within the virtual school setting. I want the audience to reflect on their own experiences, and then question their own stories and practice.

### **Data Collection**

Since resigning from my position in the brick-and-mortar classroom and taking up my new role as an online teacher, I have maintained a personal audio-recorded journal. I started recording my journal on my first day of virtual teacher training in March of 2013, and have maintained it to this day. While there are not set intervals for journal recording, no set dates, and no set duration of recorded entries, I would record entries ranging from three to 17 minutes in length on average once a week. Events in the classroom that sparked my curiosity, emotion, or memory, were inspiration for recorded entries. For instance, receiving a heartfelt letter of gratitude from a student, finding a way to reach a student and assist her in the course, or finding myself face-to-face with a difficult or trying situation would prompt me to record my perception

of the event, as well as my feelings and reflection of what took place. Some audio journal entries were recorded immediately following the event, while others were recorded within a day of the event taking place.

This journal serves as a key means of record keeping to descriptively record key events, attitudes, feelings, and “freeze specific moments in the narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 83). Journals can serve as a powerful method for creating a field text. Although a formalistic view of qualitative research seeks to maintain “objective” field notes, often filtered by separate and distinct researcher journals, in narrative inquiry, we recognize that our field texts are *always* interpretive in nature. They are always constructed by an individual at a certain moment in time. Our own experiences, relationships, and how we exist within our three-dimensional space are integral to the field notes we choose to compose. Our field text is shaped by our selective interests and disinterests. We deliberately select the aspects that we choose to reveal in our field notes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this way, my personal journal serves as an interpretive, but useful tool in terms of data collection. It provides an account of my experiences as a virtual teacher in a manner that promotes self-reflection and the “puzzling out” of experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note:

In narrative thinking, temporality is a central feature. We take for granted that locating things in time is the way to think about them. When we see an event, we think of it not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time. Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future (p. 29).

The experiences I share in my personal journal reference experiences set at a particular time. They involve particular individuals at a particular place and time. For this reason, I seek to capture my overall experience as a novice online teacher over the course of a year. In this way, I

can represent the behaviors as expressions of my story “within a particular context at a particular time” (p. 25).

Entire ethnographies (Sanjek, 1990) and autoethnographies (Yang, 1945) have been compiled and written by memories or “headnotes,” alone. While some argue that field notes are the “most important way we have of recording the ongoing bits of nothingnesses that fill our days” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 104), others believe headnotes are “more reliable than field notes or other written records of the field” (Wall, 2008, p. 45). They aid memory, and “fill in the richness, nuance, and complexity of the landscape, returning the reflecting researcher to a richer, more complex, and puzzling landscape than memory alone is likely to construct” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 83), such notes might also serve as a threat to memory as they can contradict what we recall of the voices from the field or alter the accuracy of our memory as they are continuously reread (Lederman, 1990; Sanjek, 1990; Wall, 2008).

The need for objective data and recorded facts stems from the positivistic age of educational research (Ottenberg, 1990 as cited by Wall, 2008). As we move towards a more post-modern view of research, we can relinquish our firm grasp on traditional data collection (Clough, 2002) and employ the use of memory, or headnotes, in our work (Ottenberg, 1990 as cited by Wall, 2008). In addition to my personal journals, I intend to employ my own headnotes as data and in constructing the final narratives for my autoethnography. After all, in terms of ethnography, “fieldwork and the resulting texts cannot be separated from the memories that shape them” (Wall, 2008, p. 45).

### **Data Analysis**

Stories lack what we may traditionally expect of research in terms of continuity or validity (Ellis, 2004; Sandelowski, 1991). Rather, it is in the re-telling – the continuous

experience of the experience – that we gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the initial event (Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Gilbert, 2002). Narrative inquiry is best assessed in terms of aesthetic standards, its ability to engage the reader emotionally, and the degree to which the stories are true to the lives they portray (Booth, 1997; Clough, 2002).

In an effort to get at the heart of my experiences as a virtual teacher and share those experiences within the parameters of a cohesive narrative account, I began by transcribing my audio journals. Then, I repeatedly listened to my audio journal and read the transcriptions, taking time to reflect on each experience, contribute head notes that may have remained hidden from the already recorded notes, and engage in a cycle of reading and reflecting.

I utilized Hatch's (2002) interpretive analysis coupled with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the data, identify emergent impressions, construct interim texts, and eventually identify my final research texts without risk to depersonalizing the data. Initially, I read and re-read my transcriptions as a whole. I recorded my impressions – my reflections and stimulated memory – through head notes that I added as comments on digital copies of my transcriptions. These head notes served as my reflective memos. I then read over the headnotes repeatedly to gain an even deeper understanding of the impressions gathered by the journal transcriptions and to seek out the “big picture” based on my overall experience as an online teacher.

Finally, I constructed interim texts, or texts that provide a transition from the field texts to final research texts. The interim texts assisted me as I searched for a sense of continuity and voice by which to share my final story. They assisted me in capturing the meaning I hoped to portray and the experience I strived to share with my audience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Throughout the interim texts, I constructed composite characters who represented an amalgam of

individuals present within my virtual teaching experience. I established a plotline that wove together a piecemeal of experiences into distinct, fictitious narratives. As I hope for readers to see beyond the particular locality of my work to a larger representation and connection to my experience, I focused on the overall purpose and function of my final research texts as I toyed with the interim texts – crafting, reading, changing, reflecting, and solidifying the texts I intended to disseminate to a wider audience (Clough, 2002).

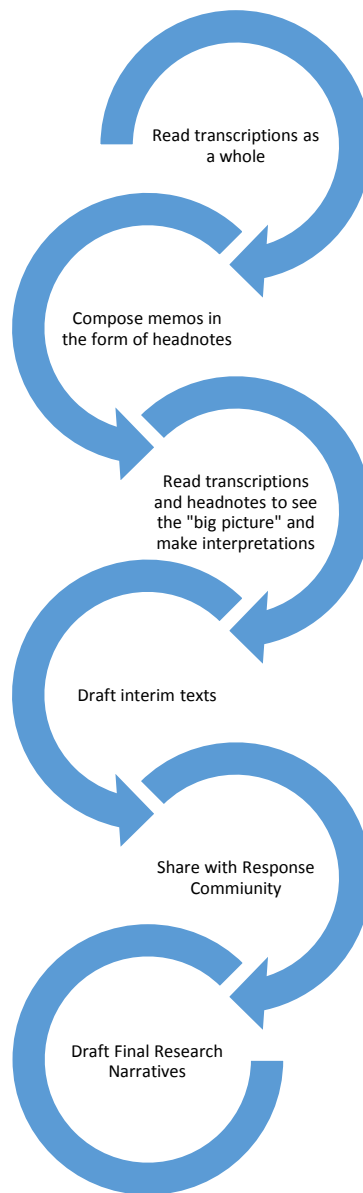


Figure 4. Data analysis process from data transcription to final research narratives.

As I transitioned from the interim texts to the final three research texts, I maintained a focus on the “interaction of ideas; in the act of thinking, turning in, decision making and focusing on the primary intent of the work” (Clough, 2002, p. 8). In crafting a final narrative for dissemination, I shared my experience in a form familiar with lived story. My final research text provides readers the opportunity to engage in a connection and conversation regarding my attempts at demonstrating the tenets of a caring teacher and fostering relational care with my online learners. The final research text consists of three distinct narratives. The narratives reflect my daily experience in the first, sixth, and twelfth month as an online teacher. Each story depicts a day in my life as an online teacher. I include a final epilogue within my final chapter as I reflect on my experience a year after transitioning from the traditional classroom to the online learning environment. In this way, I capture the evolution of my experience and day-to-day interactions as I strive to cultivate care in the online classroom.

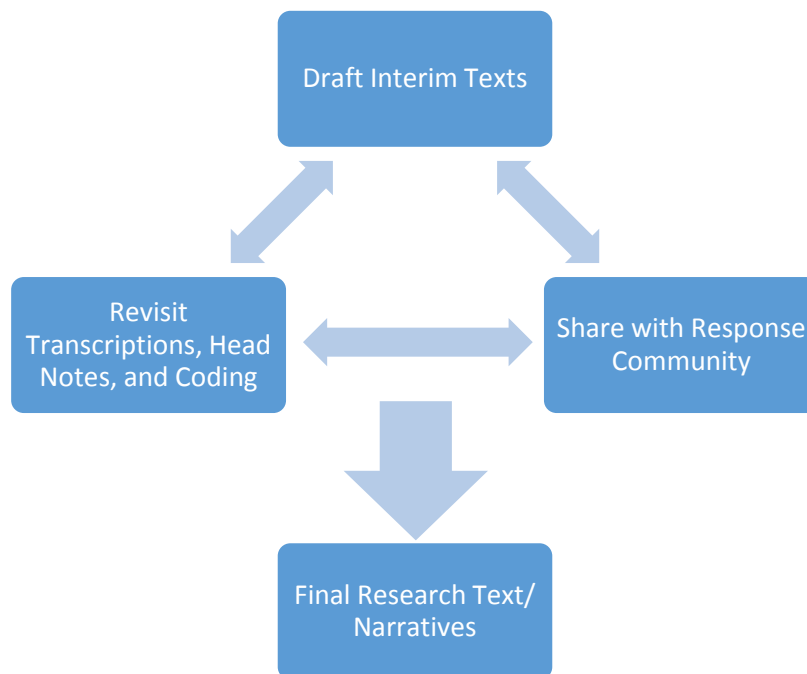


Figure 5. Final steps in data analysis process for drafting the final research texts.

Throughout the data analysis, I remembered that narrative inquiry is never a smooth transition from notes to text. Each day brings a new experience that shapes me as a teacher, and as an individual. For this reason, no two readings will ever be the same. Life is simply too complex and “messy” for such a clean, clear, linear progression in research analysis. Rather, I returned to the question of what conversation I hoped to participate in as I wove together a final narrative text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

We make meaning by creating and sharing our stories with interested parties (Gilbert, 2002). It is my hope that my own story will work to transform my own teaching and perhaps others’ as well. It is important to share our stories with the world so that readers might learn, connect, and be moved to create change. In focusing on my own experience, it’s important that I avoid “navel gazing,” or focusing too much on my own self and personal situation, that I miss out on seeing the way in which my text connects with the greater social or cultural context. Instead, I must focus on my goal to “convey a sense of social significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.122). In sharing my story, perhaps teachers will see a reflection of their own experiences, find an echo of their voice, and a glimmer of hope amidst today’s ever-changing world of education.

### **Quality of the Data**

Autoethnography doesn’t concern itself with traditional notions of “validity” and “generalizability” as much as it gives attention to personal truth and resonance with the reader (Ellis, 2004). According to Ellis (2004), autoethnographic research strives for verisimilitude. This method of research seeks to engage the reader in a lifelike representation of the researcher’s story. It evokes a “narrative truth” (2004). “Notions of generalizability and transferability in autoethnographic research tend to be guided by the researcher’s personal critique, and ultimately



reliant on the connections that readers make to link the autoethnographic text to their own experience” (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris 2012, p. 214).

Within a narrative context, “truth” is distinguished from other forms of research with an emphasis on the life-like, plausible story (Sandelowski, 1991). Unlike more post-positivist forms of research, “stories typically reflect a coherence (as opposed to correspondence) theory of truth in that the narrator strives for narrative probability – a story that makes sense; narrative fidelity – a story consistent with past experiences or other stories” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 165).

As I constructed composite characters and analyzed the notes that informed my final narratives, I utilized my journal as a means of stimulating my memory and ability to recall the details of my journey through my first year as a virtual teacher. While attempts to empirically validate my stories for consistency, reliability, or stability are futile, I strived to provide the most internally consistent, credible interpretation of my past experiences. My final stories infuse depictions of fragmented experiences to form a cohesive, “truthful,” meaningful account of my personal experience (Sandelowski, 1991). By honoring my journal entries, I constructed stories that speak to the heart of my experience, and escape a “miseducative experience,” or “less-than-adequate, even unhealthy, story” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

## **Ethics**

Autoethnography is often conducted with social or personal risk to the researcher (Ellis, 1999). It is also impossible to share our own stories, without sharing in the stories and lives of others. There exists an “intricate connection between the personal and social” that makes it impossible to speak for ourselves without speaking for others (Wall, 2008, p. 49). While most qualitative research can describe the research settings without giving away the particular institution or classroom involved in the study, the setting of my study will be made apparent to

the reader as I seek to describe my own experiences as a virtual teacher. For this reason, despite use of pseudonyms, some readers may be aware of certain individuals referenced within my study.

I want to protect the identities and experiences of those engaged in the construction of my own story. While pseudonyms may be effective in maintaining the confidentiality of several individuals in my study, they may not be as effective for others – such as my supervisors, team teachers, and students. For this reason, I developed narratives that combine or separate the identities representative of my colleagues, students, and parents (Ellis, 1995). These narratives blend together multiple identities, situations, and experiences into a single story, thereby further protecting the identities and stories of those involved. The “others” involved in my story represent amalgams of assorted individuals (Clough, 2002). Each composite character reflects a variety of personalities and experiences noted in my journal and head notes in such a way that they are not identifiable as a distinct individual.

Narrative inquiry concerns itself with the sharing of the unfamiliar in familiar terms. We strive to formulate stories that represent our lived experience and expand to a greater, social truth or phenomena (Bochner, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Once we have identified the intended purpose for our research text, we set out to write a story that engages the reader in an interaction of ideas. By fictionalizing the accounts within each research text, I provide the “protection anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happening” (Clough, 2002, p. 8).

### **Limitations**

When evaluated according to traditional standards of educational research, autoethnographic studies fall short of meeting the expectations for “rigorous, scientific

experimentation.” However, more and more, social researchers are beginning to see the challenge in viewing any form of research as neutral, impersonal, and objective in nature (Ellis et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2012; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

My stories are told through my own lens and version of “reality”. I only see a small fraction of the picture (Gilbert, 2002). In this way, I remain aware of how my own self-study limits my perceptions and the information I am able to share with my readers. Once my story is shared, it no longer belongs to me. Readers will encounter my story and read it in a way I never intended (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In sharing my texts with a response community of three online educators, I was able to expand my small fraction of the greater experience, and uncover new ways of seeing or experiencing each narrated event.

Despite my best attempts at crafting a final research text that speaks to my experience as an online teacher, I understand that “the taken-for-grantedness is never exhausted and that mystery is always just behind the latest taken-for-granted sense making” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 78). There will always remain moments, events, happenings, and meaning that escapes my peripheral vision. Every story can be told and retold in a hundred different ways. The final research texts are a single reflection of my experience amongst other possibilities and tellings. For this reason, I maintain a view of the conversation in which I hope to engage my reader, as well as a focus on the goal of expanding my private experience to a wider, social phenomena of relational care in the virtual classroom. I seek to do my best under these circumstances, “knowing all the while that other possibilities, other interpretations, other ways of explaining things are possible” (p. 42).

Finally, I am striving to fulfill three roles at once – that of researcher, participant, and teacher. This may have influenced my decisions and meaning-making. In narrative inquiry,

audience is always present (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Ellis notes, there is vulnerability on the part of the researcher in revealing herself, not being able to take back what is said, and not having control over how her words are read or critiqued (1999). Even in a personal journal, we maintain a sense of audience (Mallon, 1984). In this way, I may have unwittingly attended to my experiences in ways that propose a more “positive” outlook or reflection of myself as teacher and researcher. With this in mind, I infused personal head notes, reflection, and interim texts within my data collection and analysis. I also shared my interim texts, and research text, with colleagues and fellow researchers so they could assist me in uncovering any self-deception, or attempts at crafting an idealized reflection of myself than demonstrate the truth of my experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Summary**

My study utilized autoethnographic narrative inquiry (Bochner, 2005; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) as I sought to capture my personal, lived experience as a novice online teacher attempting to enact relational care with my virtual school students. This methodology provided me the opportunity to capture my daily experiences in a form that fits within the context of daily life – narrative (Bochner, 2005; Bochner, 2012).

My collection of personal journal entries, along with my memories and head notes, served as my field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I analyzed data collected over the course of my first year as an online teacher utilizing Hatch’s (2002) inductive analysis coupled with Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) narrative analysis. In reviewing the connections, silences, and tensions that exist within my lived experience, I crafted interim texts that I shared with my response community and developed further into my final research narratives – stories that maintain the integrity of greater truths within the context of an original plot containing composite

characters to maintain the anonymity of others who share in my personal experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clough, 2002).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### It's Only the Beginning

\*Note – All characters included in this dissertation are composite characters, and all storylines are composite plot lines. No single individual, or situation, is a direct reflection of my journal entries in the narratives that follow.

#### 8:00 a.m. – Day 1

*I'm finally on my own*, I thought to myself as I rolled over in bed and glanced at the sun peeking in from behind the bedroom curtains. It was nearing eight a.m. as I stretched, greeting the new day with a smile and sense of anticipation. Finally, my training was complete, and I was set to begin my first day as a virtual teacher – solo. I was excited, yet still a bit anxious at the same time. Would I remember everything I learned in my two weeks of shadowing? There were so many passwords to remember and computer systems to navigate, much less the responsibilities of maintaining a classroom of 60 students.

I began to run through my list of responsibilities as a new virtual teacher. Throughout the week, I would need to secure time to: call students who had not worked in seven days, call students who were 80 percent or more complete in the class, call guardians for monthly check-ins, call new students and welcome them to the class, call students working in their first two weeks of the course to see how things are going so far, and maintain a gradebook so that no work sat ungraded for more than 48 hours without review. In addition, I would have faculty meetings to attend online, live lessons to teach in my virtual classroom, calls, emails, and texts to return

within 24 hours of receiving each one, and personalized tutoring to complete for students who were struggling in the class.

*You've got this, I thought to myself. Have confidence! After all, you managed a roster of more than 100 middle school students on a daily basis for nine years. You know how to teach! Don't let a simple change in scenery convince you otherwise.*

I slid out of bed, dressed in my new work attire – a pair of blue sweat pants and my favorite college sweatshirt – and sauntered into Adalyn's room to wake her.

An obvious benefit to my new role in the virtual classroom was the additional time it would create for my daughter and me. No longer were our mornings filled with early morning hours, scurrying to have time for a quick bite to eat, shower, dress, and out the door. Nope! We now had time to enjoy a casual breakfast together, a bit of morning cartoons, and a calm, relaxed pace before heading out the door to daycare.

I had hoped Adalyn could stay home with me as I worked online. But, I understood this wasn't the best option. After all, I was likely to be busy with calls and grading throughout the day. It wouldn't be fair to keep her home and fail to provide her the time, attention, and education she deserved. For this reason, I decided to continue with childcare. At least, this new position provided me additional morning and evening hours to spend with my two-year-old daughter. I could drop her off at nine and still be there to pick her up by four. Perfect! In addition, I hoped my new position would allow me time to complete obligations around my home – such as maintaining a clean house, ensuring dinner was prepared in a timely manner each evening, and taking time for my husband, daughter, and myself.

And so, Adalyn and I sat together at her small, fold-out table and enjoyed our breakfast of toast, scrambled eggs, and chocolate milk. An hour later, we were out the door, full of smiles at the promise of what awaited on this beautiful day.

After I returned home, it was simply a matter of deciding where to start. A clear benefit of my placement was the fact I inherited a class of students from one of my best friends. For this reason, I had the chance to speak with my new students throughout my two weeks of training. I started my first day with greater insight into the lives and progress of my new students than most new virtual teachers. Allison, my best friend and new lead teacher, had recently been promoted to her lead position. As a result, I was not tasked with making a plethora of welcome calls, otherwise known as the calls in which I speak with the student and parent, introduce him/her to the class, and work to activate the student in the course. I had come to learn that most new teachers start with a fresh roster of students – each one requiring course activation, and each starting at relatively the same time. Instead, I was provided two weeks of training time in which I was able to shadow my friend and new lead teacher. The best part? She lived just a mile from my home! Rather than conduct my initial training via virtual channels, I was able to sit with her, in an intimate face-to-face environment, for two weeks to learn the ins and outs of teaching my English I course, and to greet my new students. We sat in our pjs, cheered mimosas to celebrate my new role as an online teacher, and spent time engaging in the course as friends, as well as colleagues. It was truly a unique training session, and one I was grateful to have experienced.

In that two week period, I was not only able to navigate the curriculum, make contact with each of my new students, and learn about the weekly expectations, but I was able to set up a schedule that I hoped would meet my professional, educational, and personal needs. Allison was aware of my current situation as both a full-time teacher, doctoral student, wife, and mother. She



was also aware of my tendency to overthink my actions and stress out whenever I fell short of my perfectionistic goals. She understood I approached my new position with unique needs and desires – the need to find time for every role in my life, and the desire to share my experience as research on the need for relational care in the online environment. She also knew I was riddled with anxiety nearing the end of our one-on-one training sessions. As a close friend and confidant, she was uniquely warm and personal as she worked to assist me in finding a way to achieve each of my unique goals within my role as an online teacher.

“You can do this,” I recalled her stating as I prepared to head home on my final day of shadowing, tears falling down my face. “Just remember, there isn’t *anything* that can’t wait until tomorrow. Don’t let it overwhelm you. Follow the schedule we set in place, and you will be fine.”

“I just keep seeing the big picture,” I responded. “I have so many calls to make each week, and so many things to grade, and books I have yet to read, and lessons I have yet to master, and...”

“Stop!” she interrupted. “You will get there! It’s a new job! Remember how anxious you felt nine years ago when you prepared for your first day of teaching in the brick and mortar classroom?”

I did. I remembered nights of unrest as my mind went over all of the small details – all of the things I had to learn and do to be successful in the classroom.

“You will get this. You have to start somewhere. You are much better off than some others. Trust me! You had me for two weeks, and I’m just down the road. You can work from here any time you need to! Plus, you have me as your lead. I will make sure you succeed.”

“I’m just worried I made a *huge* mistake! What if I never get to know these kids? What if I find out that I’m not the caring teacher I thought I was? What if...”

“Stop! You’re doing it again. Look,” she stated, standing before me with a sincere, understanding gaze, “Tell me what you know about Cassidy.”

“Well, she *loves* writing. You can tell she has a gift just by reading her narrative from unit two. She hopes to one day be a published songwriter.”

“Okay. Now, tell me about Alexis.”

“She has the potential in this class, but is at a place right now where she just doesn’t have the motivation to continue. Her parents are going through a divorce, and her mother recently learned that she has breast cancer. I know she will require a bit more time and attention each week to get through the class, but she has the potential to make it.”

“You see?” she questioned. “That’s just two kids! You can still get to know the kids, you’ve already started in just the past two weeks! You will talk to them, you will be there for them, and you *will* care about them. Now, stop stressing about it. You did *not* make the wrong decision. I wouldn’t have suggested that my principal pull your paperwork and conduct the interview if I didn’t have faith that you would be a perfect fit for this program. Remember, *my* reputation is on the line, too!” she laughed.

As I sat in front of my computer, I recalled the sense of regret that washed over me that final day of training.

*Forget it, I admonished myself, you made your decision. Now, it’s time to get to it! You have students to call, and assignments to review.*

I opened my calendar to look over the day's agenda. One of my main goals in joining the online world was finding time to work on completing my dissertation. For this reason, I blocked off morning hours to focus on doctoral coursework.

I recalled a conversation I had with my husband at the start of my online teacher training. "You need to find time to do your doctoral stuff," my husband had noted. "Otherwise, what's the point?"

"The point is I also want to find out how all of this works online! After all, by the time Adalyn is in school, I won't be surprised if every one of her classes is an online class – whether we like it or not. Don't we want to make sure that she has a solid education? Don't we want her to have teachers who really care about her and know her? If I can somehow help this happen, I want to my part."

"I just want to see you finish this program," he countered. "Make sure you block off time each week for your program."

"That shouldn't be a problem," I responded with a sigh. "I only have like 60 students. I'm sure I can find the time to do this *and* complete my own coursework."

Yet, as I sat at my computer, noting the time block for doctoral studies, I couldn't help but also note the number of emails that awaited response, the number of assignments awaiting review, and the voice mails on my phone that awaited a return call.

*I can get to my doctoral stuff later today, I thought to myself. It won't take that long to simply respond to these emails, make these few phone calls, and maybe grade a few assignments. After all, I know that Jose' is in need of completing the class today, or his guidance counselor has warned he will be withdrawn. I see he submitted a few activities. The sooner I get them graded, the sooner he can take the exam*

## 1:00 p.m. – Day 1

It's absolutely incredible how quickly time can pass when you're completely engrossed in the world of online teaching. I always knew that my 50 minute class periods in the brick-and-mortar setting had the potential to fly by – so little time and so much to teach! But, I had no idea just how quickly time can pass until I was engrossed in returning emails, texts, and phone calls. Before I realized it, it was after one, and I had yet to eat lunch, much less touch my graduate school work.

*Oh, well, I thought to myself, I can work on it tomorrow. I will just wake up earlier. I don't need to sleep in so much anyway. Then, I can do my graduate work before my work hours even start! Perfect!*

With that decision set, I stood from the living room couch – my new workspace – and headed into the kitchen to prepare a sandwich.

As I reached into the refrigerator for the mayo, my phone began to ring. *Ugh!* I thought to myself, *I thought I was supposed to have more time for myself – not less. Do I go ahead and answer? Or, do I have lunch, and simply call back?* I considered my options as the phone continued to ring. *Let it go to voicemail. I'm starving!*

I allowed the phone to ring until voicemail picked up, while continuing to build my turkey sandwich. Yet, the phone call weighed on my mind. Who was it? What did they need? Was it really that urgent? Was it something that could wait another hour or so?

Despite my attempts to neglect the call, and instead, take a brief reprieve from an already busy day, I found myself scarfing down my meager lunch, and reaching for the phone to listen to the voice message that awaited me.

“Hi, Mrs. Eisenbach, this is Donna Marshall. I know we’ve been working to keep Bradley enrolled in the class. However, I just don’t think it’s going to work for him right now. He is determined to get his GED now, and no matter what I say, I can’t convince him otherwise. I wanted to speak with you about possibly withdrawing him from the class. Please call me as soon as you can. I’m on lunch break until about 2p.m.. Thanks!”

*What?! He wants to drop already? But, we only just started to really get him on track! He can do this, I know it! I can’t have a student already dropping from my class!*

I quickly dialed Ms. Marshall. *It’s not yet, 2. I hope she answers.*

“Hello.”

“Hi, Mrs. Marshall?”

“Yes. This is Ms. Marshall.”

“Hi! This is Mrs. Eisenbach returning your call.”

“Oh, yes. Hi, Mrs. Eisenbach. Um, I spoke with Bradley, and he is just set on quitting right now and going for his GED. I think this divorce is just taking a huge toll on him, and he doesn’t seem to really be enjoying the class. So, unfortunately, I think we’re going to have to withdraw him.”

“Oh, no!” I exclaimed. “I understand, I just hate to see him go for a GED. I mean, I really believe he can do this.”

“I know. I just can’t seem to convince him of anything right now. He’s still really angry with me about everything, and no matter what I try to do or say, he’s just not willing to listen to me.”

*I only knew Bradley for two weeks, if you could even consider it “knowing”. Who was I to convince him to push forward and finish the class? Yet, I hated the thought that I already lost*

*a student – a student who demonstrated the competence to succeed on his final set of course assignments. Allison! I can call Allison! She will be able to help!*

“Ms. Marshall, I know that I’ve only been here a short time. Maybe Bradley just doesn’t yet feel comfortable coming to me for help in the class. What if I have Ms. de Castro call him? I know they had a great relationship while he was in her class. Maybe she can try to speak with him about it?”

Allison told me about how she and Bradley just clicked while he was in her class. He was willing to confide in her with the details of his parents’ divorce and its effect on his life.

“Yeah, that’s fine. But, if he still wants to pursue the G.E.D., what do I do to withdraw him?”

“I will find out. I’m still not 100% clear on that, but I can ask my lead and find out for you. No problem.”

“Okay. Thank you, Mrs. Eisenbach. Just give me a call or send me a text when you find out.”

As I hung up the phone, a sense of failure seemed to rush over me. *Already?* I thought to myself, *it’s only my first official day on the job and I’ve already lost a student.*

My fingers quickly searched for Allison’s name on my cell.

“Hey, Allison!”

“Hey! How is your first day going?”

“Busy! But, um, I need a favor.”

“Okay.”

“Bradley’s mom called me. She said he is determined to get his G.E.D. and quit the class.”

“Aww, I’m sorry, girl.”

“Well, I thought since you know him so much better than me, maybe you can call him and talk to him? Obviously, I’m not getting anywhere with him, but maybe you could talk to him and convince him to finish the class? He only has...” I quickly searched his gradebook and counted up the number of remaining assignments “about six assignments left! I mean, he’s so close to completing! Would you mind giving him a call?”

“Sure. No problem. Can you email me his number again? I’ll reach out sometime today.”

“Great. Yes, I’ll email it to you now. Thank you!”

“No problem. How is everything else going so far? You managing okay?”

“Yeah, I didn’t have the time I thought I’d have for my coursework today, but that’s fine. I’m just going to wake up earlier tomorrow and work on it earlier in the day. It’s crazy how you can get sucked into the emails and calls and grading so quickly.”

“Yep! Tell me about it. I forget to eat lunch most days!” she laughed.

I looked down at my empty plate. “Exactly!”

“You’ll get the hang of it. It takes time. Like I said before, the key is finding a work/life balance. Don’t let yourself get too consumed each day. I know you. You have these perfectionistic tendencies and it can be tough to just let the phone or email go sometimes, but it’s important you take a break once in a while, okay?”

“Yep. I got it. Thanks!”

“No problem. And remember, online learning isn’t for everyone. I know that’s tough for you to hear after leaving your brick and mortar classroom – an environment where every child *has* to find a way to succeed. But, the truth is that online learning is very different. It’s just not for everyone.”

I hated hearing this again. Since joining the world of online education, I heard from teachers, trainers, and leads alike that online learning simply wasn't for *everyone*. I could recall teachers telling me of all of the students they withdrew on a weekly basis either as a result of failure to thrive or move forward in the course, or simply because they failed to log in and work on a regular basis.

“Brooke, you understand, right? I'm not saying that Bradley simply isn't meant for this class, but it will be a reality that you *will* have students who have to be dropped from your course.”

“Yeah,” I hesitated. “I'm just hoping this so-called reality is something I can find a way to avoid in my own class.”

“I know you do,” she continued, “We all do. No teacher wants to say, ‘Hey, you won't make it here’ or ‘Sorry, I have to let you go’, but it's a harsh reality of this learning environment. We do what we can, our ‘due diligence’ if you will. We call. We email. We text. But sometimes, the kids just disappear. We have no way of knowing where they are or what has happened. We do what we can to get in touch with them, to push them, to help them, to see them succeed, but some kids just don't make it. You need to realize this so you don't get so down on yourself when a student is withdrawn from the class.”

“I know,” I replied. “I understand.”

“Okay. Do you need anything else?”

“Nope. Not right now. Just be sure to call Bradley today.”

“I will. I promise. If you need anything else, call me.”

“Thanks.”



## 2:00 p.m. – Day 1

As the day progressed, I found myself engrossed in grading, calling, and emailing parents and students alike. I kept an eye on my gradebook, knowing students were eager to receive feedback so they could proceed in the course.

Marcus submitted his unit two narrative for the fifth time in the past two weeks. I hated that he worked so hard each and every week to get his narrative up to a passing grade. As grateful as I was that this learning environment provided students the opportunity to revise and resubmit work until they earned the grade they hoped to achieve, I knew it was not only holding him back from completing the course. I could sense his growing frustration each time I sent it back with very detailed steps for revision, along with the words “Keep at it for me! I know you can get this!”

After reading it for the fifth time, I was determined to get him on the phone to discuss it together. My prior feedback notes requesting a phone call for assistance seem to have been in vain. I had yet to hear from him by email, phone or text.

I logged into my student database in search of his contact information. There was just one number listed – a home phone. I also noted he was currently enrolled in a local high school.

*Hmmm, I thought to myself glancing at the clock, It's only 2:00 p.m. He's probably not out of school, yet. I could try calling, but it's likely he won't be home and a voice mail hasn't worked in the past. It's not likely to work now. I can just call him later this evening.*

I made a note to myself to be sure to call Marcus about his narrative work later in the evening, and continued making my way through student work in the gradebook.

After emptying my gradebook of student assignments, I took another peek at my student database.

*Who hasn't worked in the past week?* I wondered. I arranged my students by the last date an assignment was received, and noted that Brittany had not submitted work. *She's a homeschool student. Allison mentioned that she works regularly, but struggles on assignments. In fact, I remember reviewing her paper again last week. She did have trouble with her thesis. I'll give her a call and see what's up.*

I pulled out my work phone and dialed Brittany's primary contact number. Someone picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?" someone answered.

"Hi! Is this Brittany?" I asked.

"Umm, yeah."

"Hi, Brittany! It's Mrs. E. from English I. How are you today?"

"Oh, I'm fine."

"Great! I just wanted to check in with you today. I noticed you haven't logged into class this week. Is everything okay?"

"Um, yeah. I'm fine. I'll work."

"Oh, okay," I noted, a bit taken back by her brief response. "Well, did you need my help with anything? I see here that the last few assignments you've turned in have not earned a passing grade. Did you need help with the concepts or directions?"

"Um, no. That's fine."

"Brittany?"

"Yeah."

"What's going on? Are you sure you're okay?"

Silence.

“Brittany? Are you there?”

Silence.

“Hello?”

“Hello?”

“Brittany?”

“Yeah”

At this point, I could hear the sound of sniffles coming across the phone line.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just hate this class.”

Silence. It was as if I had just taken a second punch to my stomach in a single day. *Yep! I made a mistake! I shouldn’t have ever joined this program.*

“You hate this class? Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is ever good enough for you!”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I submit work over and over again, and every time you send it back to me with more stuff to fix. I just give up. I will *never* have it the way you want it!”

At this point, Brittany was sobbing through the phone.

“Brittany, do me a favor and take a deep breath. Okay? Just take a deep breath in...”

*Breathing in*

“... and now breathe out.”

*Breathing out*

“Okay. First, let me start by saying I am so sorry you feel this way. I *never* want you to feel as though you’re not ‘good enough’ for me. Okay?”

“Okay,” she sniffled.

“Then, let me tell you that this is a *tough* class! I mean, it’s *tough*! The fact you’ve made it more than halfway through in just...” I paused to check her noted progress on the computer screen. “...ten weeks shows me that you are dedicated and you have the ability to do this. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” she sighed.

“I want you to understand that this is a learning process. Okay? You’re not supposed to get everything ‘perfect’ the first time. Take it from me, I know! I’m working on my Ph.D. right now, and let me tell you, I’m always finding that I have to do things again and again to get them right. Okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she quietly stated.

“I mean, if you were to get everything perfect the first time through, it would tell me two things: 1) We aren’t challenging you and for that reason you’re not receiving the education you deserve, and 2) I have no purpose here. I mean, if you already know all of this stuff, *you* should teach it, not me.”

Brittany gave a brief chuckle to my sad attempt at a light-hearted compliment.

“I’m telling you, Brittany, you’re doing just fine! Just remember you can reach out to me when you’re having trouble! That’s why I’m here! But, if you don’t call me or text me and say, ‘Hey, Mrs. E. I need help, it’s hard for me to see that or find ways to help you. I’m not standing in a classroom with you. I can’t see your hand shoot into the air and wave around because you have a question. I can’t look at your face and see that your forehead is creased and you’re looking at me with an expression that simply says, ‘Huh?!’”

Brittany laughed again.

“So, let’s do something to not only get you moving along, but to help you feel better.”

“Okay,” she responded.

I took another look at Brittany’s gradebook. I noticed she had several recent assignments with a “1” or “0” as the assigned grade.

*Ugh, the double-edged sword of 1s and 0s, I thought to myself. During my training, I learned a “trick” to encouraging student resubmissions and calls for assistance.*

I recalled something Allison said during one of our first days of training.

*“The thing is, you want your students working each week, but the way the course is designed, sometimes students need to resubmit prior work in order to complete the new work – lessons build off of the last assignment,” shared my lead teacher. “So, what I always do is I assign a ‘1’ for assignments where the student submits the wrong work, or incomplete work, or work that is completely missing the mark on the objectives. This way, it still shows they’ve been engaged in the course – they’re working. However, the work they are submitting needs to be updated and resubmitted. If you simply reset the work, it doesn’t show in the system as attempted. For that reason, the student shows as inactive and becomes at greater risk for withdrawal. The ‘1’ looks bad in terms of a grade which does encourage them to revise, but it shows that they at least tried to do the lesson, so it shows they are working.”*

As I returned to my consideration of Brittany, I found myself conflicted. *I agree that this system is something that works, I thought to myself. I’ve seen kids log in and resubmit the “1”s and “0”s over the past couple of weeks. It also helps me to see who is working and where they struggle. However, I think it’s holding Brittany back... I wonder if it’s holding others back, too...*

“Okay. So, I see that there are a several assignments you attempted, but seems you maybe just misread the directions or submitted a file I couldn’t read due to the file type,” I shared with Brittany.

“So, I’m going to just...” I began resetting assignments with a 1 or 0 – assignments pre-set by Allison, and those I was able to review throughout my training, “reset these for you...”

Sure enough, Brittany’s grade began to climb. “And there you go!” I exclaimed. “Resetting those assignments has already moved you from an ‘F’ to a ‘C’ in the course!”

“Really?!?!” she exclaimed.

“Yep! So, what if we do this: I will reset any work you submit that is off in terms of not following the directions or happens to be incomplete. In addition, anything you submit that you feel ‘unsure’ about, mark as a ‘draft’ in the comment box for me. This tells me that this is your attempt at a draft of the assignment, and you’re looking for feedback before I issue you a grade.”

“That sounds great,” she stated with a hint of excitement in her voice.

“Okay. Now, because you *do* seem to be having a hard time in this unit, let’s also set up weekly one-on-one tutoring sessions. This way, we can review your work from the week together, take a look at where you’re struggling and I can tutor you on it, and then we can issue your work for the new week so you have a set goal to achieve.”

“Yes. That works. Thank you,” Brittany responded.

“Awesome. Okay. Let me look at my calendar. You know your schedule better than I do. So, tell me what day and time are best for you.”

“Umm, well, I have tennis practice almost every day. I also travel for tennis tournaments, so my schedule is a bit wacky.”

“That’s okay! That’s why I’m asking you. If we get to a week and it turns out you have a tournament the next week, we will alter our schedule for that week. However, I think setting something up now will really help because you will know that if nothing else, I will call you that day/time every week for help.”

“Yeah. Okay. Umm” Brittany paused, searching her memory or calendar for a convenient day and time. “What about Friday evenings? Maybe around six?”

*Friday? That’s family movie night, I thought to myself. I can’t cut out family movie night... It’s important to Adalyn, George, and me. It’s our real time together each week. I always have so many things pulling me in so many directions. Even Allison mentioned time and time again of the importance of maintaining a family/work balance... wait a minute, I mean work/life balance...*

“Gosh, I wish I could do that, but Friday evening is tough for me. Are there any other days that work for you?”

*Please say, “Yes.” Please say, “Yes.”*

“Ummm, yeah. How about, I guess, hmmm,” Brittany paused. “Well, I don’t go to practice until around five on Tuesdays. What about around like four or so on Tuesday?”

“Perfect!” I exclaimed. “How about I put you down for some time between four and four-thirty on Tuesdays? This way, *if* I happen to be on a call already with another student, or I have another student schedule a quiz call, I can call you around that time. Will that be okay?”

“Yes. That will work,” Brittany responded.

The sound of anxiety seemed to have lifted from her voice, replaced with a sense of relief.

“Thank you, Mrs. E. I’m sorry about before,” Brittany started.

“Hey, no need to apologize. I completely get it. I get frustrated, too. It happens.”

“Yes,” Brittany replied. “Thanks!”

“No problem. Okay, so let’s talk a bit about the work I reset. I want to see what we can do to get you through assignments 2.01 and 2.02 for this week. I think if we focus on just these

two for the week, you should be okay. If you find that you have additional time, you're more than welcome to push forward. How does that sound?"

"Awesome," she stated.

I then spent the next 15 minutes walking Brittany through the concepts and lessons she would encounter that week. It was if a weight was lifted from my shoulders. Yet, a truth suddenly crept up from the shadows of my naivety.

*Okay. So, I can do this, I thought to myself. However, how on earth would I have the time to do this for every student? Not that I will need to do that. Obviously, every child has different needs. Allison already told me that several of the kids will simply sail through the class without much attention from me. I wonder how this is going to play out in the long run. Not to mention, I have a call scheduled for 4:00 every Tuesday. There goes my plan to pick up Adalyn by 4 p.m.! How could I have been so naïve to think that I would manage this job by 4 p.m.? I teach high school kids! So many of them are public or private school students. They have after-school jobs and sports! They won't be home each day before 4 p.m. I won't be able to complete my weekly calls by 4 p.m. each day, much less complete grading each day. What have I gotten myself into?*

By the time I completed my call with Brittany, I noticed another half hour had passed. I took a look at my gradebook. The once empty gradebook was now filled with 22 assignments awaiting review. My once empty voice mail now housed eight voice recordings, not to mention the number of missed calls that went by without a voice message to return.

### **5:00 p.m. – Day 1**

Five o'clock was fast approaching.



*Damn it! I thought to myself. I'm already an hour late picking up Adalyn! I have to leave now if I want to get there on time to pick her up before closing hour! Just one more assignment. I'll grade just one more, and then I'm out the door for sure!*

I quickly scanned the gradebook for a quick quiz – something that wouldn't require much time to grade. I settled on Johnny's assignment. *It looks good; he has the general idea. A few grammatical errors in the open-ended response question, but nothing serious.*

I made my quick note to Johnny, "Hey, Johnny! This looks great. Wonderful work analyzing the language in this letter, and picking up on the author's use of tone to really elicit a sense of resentment in the reader. Great work! For full credit, be sure to edit!"

*There, that should do it. Yes, he will probably see this and think, 'What does she mean I need to 'edit'?' But, at least he earned a high "B" and perhaps this will simply push him to further his own editing abilities by searching for the missing commas and quotation marks on his own.*

I closed my computer, aware that I had at least two emails to read, snatched up my car keys, and bolted towards the door.

No sooner had I turned the ignition when my phone rang.

*Okay, I have at least 10 minutes before I get to A's daycare. I can probably answer this call, and complete it before I get there to pick her up.*

"Hello? This is Mrs. Eisenbach."

"Hi! Mrs. E.? This is Michael Turner."

"Oh! Hi, Michael! How are you?"

"I'm good. I was just calling because I need just the final phone quiz for the class so I can take my final exam. Can you do that right now?"

*A phone quiz? A call for course help I could handle... well, as long as I could remember the assignment. This was all still relatively new to me. But, a phone quiz – a required unit assessment – would take at least 15 minutes to complete. Even worse, I have yet to remember all of the required questions. I'm sure I will forget to ask something important. ? However, Michael was ready to complete the course. This was a huge accomplishment for him! He was currently living in a juvenile facility as a condition of his probation agreement. He needed this course credit to move forward and return home.*

“Sure!” I responded. “Just give me one second.”

I located a church parking lot and pulled in. I quickly scrolled through my phone for the email Allison sent to me during our training containing the course phone quiz questions.

“Give me just a second to find the correct questions, and we will be set to complete this for you.”

*5:02 p.m. Shit!!*

“Okay, first, can you confirm your date of birth for me?”

“January 27, 1999”

“Great! Okay. Now, signify with a ‘yes’ that you are alone in the room, and I am not on speaker phone.”

“Well, I can't actually be alone in the room while I'm here.”

“Oh, right. I'm sorry. My mistake. It's our academic integrity procedures. I'm sorry.”

“No worries, Ms. E.,” Michael responded.

“Okay. So, yes. Let's get started,” I noted.

By the time Michael and I completed his quiz, it was after 5:15 p.m.

*Shit! Shit! Shit! I'm a terrible mother! My daughter is probably sitting there wondering where the hell I am right now!*

“Okay, Michael! Great work! You need to keep working on your understanding of ‘theme’ and ‘conflict’ before the final exam. I noticed you struggled with these concepts. Remember, you want to be able to define *and* apply both concepts on the final exam.”

“Okay. I got it. Thanks, Ms. E. Um, can I have the exam password? I want to take it right away so I can finish up. My mom is coming to visit tomorrow! I may be going home next week if I can complete this class and Geometry!”

“That’s wonderful, Michael! Are you excited? Nervous?”

“Well, I’m kinda’ both! I mean, I’m excited to be leaving here. Trust me,” he laughed, “But, uh, yeah, my boys are back home, and I got into a lot of trouble with them so, I’m kind nervous, too. But, uh, I have a question for you.”

*5:20 p.m. Shit!!*

“Sure! What’s up?”

“Um, well, my mom, she say that I should get my G.E.D. She don’t think I can complete this degree and she wants me to just get my G.E.D. But, I don’t know. I mean, I really liked the online school thing. I think it keeps me out of trouble, I’m not in school hanging around the people who got me into trouble, and I can do it! I mean, I’m about to finish your class and my other class, and I’ve caught up on my credits. Do you think I can do it?”

*5:21 p.m. Shit!*

“You want to move forward and get your degree, but your mom says, ‘G.E.D.?’?” I asked. This reminded me of Bradley and my conversation with his mother earlier in the day.

“Yeah. She doesn’t think I will stick with this at home. She thinks I stuck with it here cause you know, I gotta’, but she thinks I won’t do it at home. She says I just go for the G.E.D. But, I don’t know. I mean, I actually like the online thing. I had fun with it! What do you think?”

“Well, from what I’ve seen, you did a wonderful job!”

*I remembered starting each day of my training with a new email from Michael. He made sure to email me every morning with a “quote of the day” to encourage me throughout the day. We had wonderful conversations as he transitioned to my class. He had work submitted each and every day, and he demonstrated the ability to persevere. Though he wasn’t a “top scoring student,” he was willing to learn and grow in the course.*

“I think you could do it. But, I personally believe that anyone can do what they put their mind to. I think if this is something you enjoy, and it’s something you feel you can do, then go for it! Why settle for less than what you believe is your best? Why not push yourself to higher limits and higher standards in life?”

“Thank you, Mrs. E.” he noted with an audible smile. “I appreciate that. I’m gonna talk to my mom about it when I see her. I really want to do this. I just wanted to thank you, too. I mean, without this online class, I couldn’t have finished this class and wouldn’t have this chance.”

As we hung up, I put the car in reverse, backed out of the parking spot, and headed back towards Adalyn’s daycare.

*I’m so torn! I love helping students. I love helping them succeed. But, I’m an hour and a half late to picking up my own daughter. What did I get myself into?*

I looked down at my phone. Six missed calls.

*I’m not calling them back right now. I’m not even checking my voice mail. I need to pick up Adalyn, get her home, prepare dinner, give her a bath, and maybe- just maybe- check my*

*calls after that. Maybe George can sit with Adalyn while I return a few voice mails. Then, I have to make time for George. I'm not even listening to voicemails, yet. I know if I do, I will be tempted to return calls. Allison said I have 24 hours to return calls... I might have to exist in that 24 hour window for a bit – at least until I can get a better hold on what is expected and work out my schedule.*

I parked in the daycare lot, but paused a moment. *I'll just take a quick listen in case there is any kind of emergency call I need to make.*

*“Hi, Mrs. E. It's Marcus. You've been trying to get in touch with me? I'm free until about six tonight. Call me back.”*

*Shit!*

As I walked through the lobby, I found myself rushing to Adalyn's classroom. Upon opening the door, I heard the sound of my daughter crying.

“Adalyn? What's wrong, baby?”

“Adalyn! Your mommy is here!” exclaimed her teacher. “Sorry! She's been standing at the door and crying, ‘Where is Mommy’ for at least the past half hour,” laughed her teacher.

*Shit...*

(Ding! – Another voice mail)

### **Class Loads and Stella... The Perfect Combination – Six Months Later**

“You've been at it for hours,” whispered my husband as he stepped onto our back patio. “It's almost time to put Adalyn to bed for the night. What are you still doing out here?”

“Two-hundred and forty-seven,” I responded with a tone of frustration and desperation.

“What?”

“Two-hundred and forty-seven! That’s how many students I now have on my roster! Two-hundred and forty-seven kids!”

“What? Why?” questioned George.

“Because we lost *a lot* of teachers a few weeks ago, and the students had to go somewhere, and new students are still lining up to take the class so they can get their course credit!”

I sat back and began to massage my forehead – a weak attempt to stifle the headache that threatened to emerge. “Two-hundred and forty-seven! I’m losing my mind, George. I mean, I’m seriously about to go off the deep end,” I stammered as I stared at the student roster illuminated on my computer screen.

“Okay, well, we can talk about it in a bit. But, right now, your daughter is calling to you to come inside and read her a bedtime story,” he responded, turning his head to peer inside the house.

“Mooooommmmyyy!” I heard Adalyn cry out from her bedroom.

“I have one more kid to call. He has been waiting on a return call all afternoon and it’s already eight o’clock. He needs a DBA so he can complete the class.”

“Well, he can wait until tomorrow. Right? Didn’t you say you have 24 hours to return calls?”

“Yes, but,” I started to respond.

“So, let him wait. It’s not an emergency. *Your* kid hasn’t seen you all day, and you worked late last night, too. You need to go spend time with her. So, close your computer, turn off your phone, and go see Adalyn.”

I took a deep breath and closed my computer.

“You’re right,” I responded as I stood from the patio chair, tucked my computer under my arm, and headed into the house. “And, God, I need a beer.”

“Okay. Well, go read to your daughter, and then let’s relax for a bit. You did the best you could today. Everything else can wait until tomorrow,” responded George as he rubbed my back and walked with me towards Adalyn’s bedroom.

“Honestly, Babe,” he noted, “There is no real ‘emergency’ with this class. Now, go read to your daughter.”

Thirty minutes later, I popped the top on a Stella and laid back on the living room couch.

“Don’t you want to eat something?” George inquired.

“Oh, crap! You’re right!” I noted. “Shit! I don’t remember the last time I ate anything.”

“I’ll heat up some spaghetti for you,” George noted as he made his way into the kitchen.

“So, what the hell happened? Why do you have so many students?”

“Okay,” I started. “So, basically, there was a change in our school’s funding model. As a result, we received a lot less money from the state per kid. So, they had to let *a lot* of teachers go. As a result, those of us who ‘made the cut’ were left to divvy up the classes of those who lost their job. In addition, we still have a waiting list of students who need to start the course. They have to place those kids, too. So, that means for the time being, we’re looking at class loads over 200.”

“Shit!” George exclaimed. “Well, I guess, at least you still have a job!”

“I know!” I responded, taking a lengthy swig of my beer. “And I feel like shit for complaining about it. I mean, for a while I worried I would be losing my job, too! I mean, I’ve only been here for six months now. I figured it might be a last hired, first fired kind of deal. But, I guess they used some other system to determine who they kept and who was let go.”

“Well,” shared George as he retrieved my plate of spaghetti from the microwave, “I guess you must be doing something right, then. So, you shouldn’t worry so much now.”

“Easy for you to say,” I sighed. “I have over 200 students! Two-hundred students who I have to call, email, and grade for each week! Two-hundred students who I have to keep on track in the course, because if they become a ‘non-worker’”

“A what?” George interrupted.

“A ‘non-worker’ – a kid who isn’t submitting work each week,” I explained. “If they become a non-worker, I get a lower score on my teacher evaluation, and they fall behind pace. If they fall behind pace, they risk forgetting crucial information and performing poorly on the final exam – an exam, I might add, that is already flawed, yet accounts for *half* of my final evaluation score.” I took a breath and began to calm down for a moment. I couldn’t allow myself to look at the “big picture” for too long, or it would cause my anxiety levels to rise even further.

“God, can you remember how stressed I was just six months ago facing a class load of 60? I thought I would never make it! Then, they talked about moving my numbers upwards of 150, and I completely freaked!”

“Yes,” responded George, joining me on the couch as he placed my plate of food on the coffee table before me. “Here, eat something,” he motioned, handing me a fork and napkin.

“Thanks,” I replied, taking a large bite of the re-heated spaghetti.

“Yeah, I remember. You were freaking out that you wouldn’t have time for your students if they gave you more than 150. Didn’t you tell Allison you would quit before you’d take on more students than that?”

“Yes!” I mumbled through a mouth of food. I quickly chewed and swallowed another bite before reaching for more beer. “But, now, I’m just at a loss! Shit, I finally had a system! It



was working, too! I had time to call every student every week – even though we’re not expected to do that!” I exclaimed, throwing my hands into the air.

“I mean, I had time to talk to my kids! I had time to email them every week and keep their parents updated on their progress. I had time to make fun video emails for students to encourage them to work and help them feel better when they were having a bad week. In fact, I would make it a point each week to identify students with a birthday and send them a personalized e-card!” I paused to down the last swallow of my pale ale.

“I remember weeks when students were having a difficult time – whether it was personal, or academic – and I had time to talk with them. For instance, one of my students was released from treatment for a personal situation, and was trying to get adjusted to things back on her own. I knew she was having a hard time, so we arranged a Skype session. I introduced her to Adalyn, and she let me meet her new puppy. I even had time to talk with her mom. And, it wasn’t entirely school related conversation! It was like I was in the classroom again, getting to know my student, and telling her more about me. I even sent a card – not an e-card – but an actual card congratulating her on her return home. Her mom said her face lit up when she saw it.”

“Yeah,” replied George, “So?”

“So? So I don’t know my kids like that anymore. I mean, I just don’t have the time! You want to know what my day was like today? I’ll give you an example of what my day is like now versus then,” I shared, preparing to unleash the stress and truth of my *new* daily reality.

“To start, you’re fully aware I had to wake up around three a.m. to work on my dissertation proposal. Fun times, there,” I noted.

“Yes, but that’s just for now. You’re making progress on it,” George tried to assure me.

“Not enough! Are you kidding? I’m half-asleep each time I even try to work on the proposal. I’m not connecting ideas in the right way, my research is lacking in depth, and it’s slow-going. My proposal defense is coming up, and I still can’t get my Chapter two to make any kind of lateral sense!”

“But, at least you’re working on it again,” George responded. “That’s better than a couple of weeks ago when just the thought of looking at it was enough to have you in tears.”

“True. But these early mornings are killing me!” I responded, noting the empty beer bottle that now littered the coffee table. “Okay, so then, I realized it was suddenly almost eight, and I had to hurry to get Adalyn dressed, give her a doughnut to eat, and get her out the door to daycare. We were right on time today, but I could tell the teacher is getting a bit upset at our late arrivals.”

“So what? We’re paying them to watch her. If they are pissed that you’re a few minutes late in the morning, I will talk to them,” George responded with a tone of resentment.

“No, no, no. It’s okay. Anyway, I get home and sure enough, I already have at least five calls to return and a long line of emails to filter through. Not to mention the 80 or so assignments in my gradebook to check.”

“Okay,” responded George, “Take a breath. There’s nothing wrong with having calls to return and things to grade. Didn’t they give you guys more time to return calls and assignments now that you have more kids in your class?”

I let out a laugh. “Uh, no.”

“Well, I mean come on, they can’t really expect that your classroom is going to look the same way it did a month ago given these changes, right?”

“I sure as hell hope not,” I quickly noted. “I mean, most of the transfer students I received haven’t worked in weeks. Some of them haven’t been called in months! It’s obvious there’s a reason some teachers were let go, but at the same time, now I’m working overtime to try and get kids back in action or dropped from class! I mean, the kids who haven’t worked in over a month and don’t respond to my calls, texts, or emails, at least I can withdraw those. This way, I can at least lower my numbers by a bit for the next week,” I caught myself admitting.

“God, I never thought this would be me!” I cried.

“What do you mean?” questioned George.

“I mean, I never thought I would be the teacher in a hurry to drop kids! I remember thinking to myself months ago that I would do *everything* I could to keep kids working and to help them succeed in finishing the class! When I first started this job, I thought the other teachers were crazy to just drop kids every week. I swore that would never be me! I mean, I called students multiple times! I texted! I emailed! I even sent e-cards, created PowerPoint slides to encourage them, and sent video emails with messages to let them know I believed they could do it! I started new programs to praise kids who worked hard all week – like my student of the week program!” I shared. “For a few months, I created a student of the week. I took time to see which student really worked hard that week to improve. It wasn’t always a top scoring student, but someone who I noticed persevered in a difficult or challenging assignment – a student who maybe once dropped away, but suddenly popped back up and showed real effort! I would call the student, let them know I was proud of what they accomplished that week, post their photo and interesting information about them on our class page for all to see, and even sent out a mail merge to parents each week with the name of top students included.”

“That sounds great, why can’t you still do that?” George inquired.

“Because I just don’t have the time! I mean, look at me! I’m working more than 12 hours a day, and it’s still not enough to complete just my basic weekly tasks,” I muttered, tears forming in the corner of my eyes.

“For example, I had a student who struggled throughout the entire time he was in my class. His dad is a journalist, so he often had added pressure to perform well in his English coursework. But, he struggled in writing. However, he pushed himself to make it. Every week, he logged in to work and he never hesitated to call me for help when he needed it – which was rather often. But, together, we worked to have him finish the course and complete with a C average. This was a great achievement for him. So, in his final week, I called him up to let him know he was my student of the week. George,” I noted, grabbing his arm, “he literally broke into tears over the phone. His mother took the phone from him to find out what was wrong with her son,” I laughed. “I told her that his hard work for the week did not go unnoticed and that he was selected as our student of the week. And guess what?” I asked.

“What,” George asked.

“She started to cry, too!” I smiled. I remembered the sound of joy that met my ears during that phone call just a few weeks ago.

“She told me how much my weekly tutoring helped her son, and how he’s always struggled in English, but thanks to my willingness to help him on each assignment and encourage him every week, he was able to make it. The student then got back on the phone and thanked me, too. He even sent me a lengthy email telling me how much I helped him, and how he thought I was an incredible teacher.” I stood to go to the kitchen and retrieve another Stella from the fridge.

“That’s great,” George shared.

“Yes, it is! But, I just don’t have the time to do that anymore. For instance, just today, one of my ELL students called me for help on her narrative,” I started.

“ELL?” asked George.

“Yes. English isn’t her first language,” I explained.

“Oh, okay,” he nodded.

“So,” I paused as I poured my second beer into a beer stein. “She obviously struggles in this course with this environment. I used to have time each week to really help her and discuss the work with her. We would even visit my virtual classroom and walk through assignments on the white board. But, now, I just don’t have the time to help like I used to! I mean, when I am able to call her back, it’s hours after she reaches out to me for help and it’s not unusual that she won’t be around to answer the phone when I try and call. We end up playing an endless game of phone-tag, and she ends up falling further and further behind in her work. In fact, she has been stuck on the same lesson now for at least two weeks. Mainly because I haven’t been able to connect with her on the phone.”

I walked back to the living room and plopped back down on the couch. “Apparently, my frustration is seeping into my voice on phone calls, too.”

“Well, you just have to take a minute to walk away and get your shit together,” George suggested.

“I try! But, I’m just so incredibly frustrated! The other day, another student called me for a phone quiz. From the moment I started talking, he stopped and asked, ‘Ms., are you okay? You don’t sound like yourself.’ And he was right! I have not been myself since this started. I’m not the happy, eager, optimistic teacher I was when I started just six months ago. I’ve become this

worn down, exhausted shadow of myself,” I shared, chugging down my delicious, frothy beverage.

“Oh, and I didn’t tell you about the voicemail I received today, either! Okay, so one of my students is currently back and forth between his mom and dad. They recently separated, and he spends one week with mom and one week with dad. But, his parents don’t communicate with one another. It’s like they refuse to even acknowledge the other parent. So, I notice he isn’t working, and on the rare occasion that he does submit work, it’s lacking in focus, clarity, and quite honestly, reads as though he’s not even reading over the lesson.”

“Okay,” noted George.

“So, despite my best attempts to call home – note that I really only have time now to make one attempt a week – if that – and to email and text the student and parents, I can’t seem to get in touch with anyone. So, I basically gave up! I called once more this evening and left a voice mail on mom’s phone. I mentioned that he hasn’t worked in a couple of weeks, won’t respond to my attempts for help, and I am going to have to drop him from the class.

“I get a voice mail later from his mom. She tells me that she has worked with *many* virtual teachers in the past and has *never* had anyone call and leave such a message on her voice mail. She said that I was *incredibly* rude and selfish and that I should be ashamed to leave a message for a child with my tone of voice. She said she is going to be reaching out to my principal tomorrow about my behavior,” I shared, tears now rolling down my cheeks.

“Well, what are you supposed to do? Aren’t you expected to drop students if they don’t work for a couple of weeks?”

“Well, technically, we’re asked to withdraw after three weeks of no work, but I gave up! I mean, I *can’t* get him on the phone! How on earth am I supposed to know what’s going on if he

won't talk to me? I had no idea they were working on a lesson. I had no idea he was having trouble! I'm not psychic!" I exclaimed. "But, maybe she's right! I mean, maybe I had a tone I just didn't catch! It's entirely possible. I'm so overwhelmed lately, I just want to quit. How could that *not* seep into my conversation?"

"Okay, well, one thing you need to do is stop focusing entirely on the negative," George suggested.

I started to interject, but he raised his hand to stop me.

"I get it. There's a lot of negative going on here, but I'm sure you're doing more than you realize with your students," he encouraged.

"Well, I did get a wonderful video email today." I smiled.

"See?" George responded.

"It was from one of the first students to actually start and finish the course with me. She was enrolled in my class a few weeks after I started the job, and actually completed the class last week. Out of nowhere, I got a video email from her today. She wanted to let me see her and tell me more about her life, her dreams of becoming an artist, and to tell me thank you for helping her complete the class," I smiled as I thought back to the video email that started my morning. "It was actually really great," I continued.

"The only thing is, I now have to wonder how many of those kinds of emails I'm likely to receive. I mean, I had the chance to know this student. I had time to work with her each week and talk to her about life – not just coursework during our calls. But, now, I try to limit phone calls to a minute or two. The quicker the call, the more students I can reach out to each week," I shared.

“Is that something you are required to do?” asked George. “Are you expected to really call every kid every week?”

“Well, no,” I admitted, “but, it’s something I like to do. At least call and see if they need my help, or tell them which assignments I need to see submitted that week.”

“But, it’s not required,” George reminded me. “I think this is part of the problem. I think you’re trying to do too much! You’re trying to reach beyond the expectations of the job, and right now, you just can’t do that,” he suggested.

I took another drink, and placed the half-empty glass atop the coffee table. “I know. You’re right. But, I hate feeling like I’m not helping every student.”

“Well, is calling every student really helping every student?” he asked. “I mean, sure, you have kids who probably need you to call them each week, but I’m sure there are also kids who can get by just fine without you,” he added.

I didn’t want to admit it, but I knew he was right. Who was I trying to kid? I was spending so much time trying to maintain my rapport with students and strategies from before the ‘apocalypse’, or massive layoff, that I was neglecting the kids who might need me the most in favor of quantity over quality.

“You have to get it through your head that you’re not in your former classroom anymore. This isn’t your middle school classroom. You’re online now. It’s going to be different for you,” George suggested. “I know you loved getting to know your students. I know you loved feeling as though you were making a real difference in their lives,” he continued. “But, it’s not the same. You can’t expect it to be the same.”



“I know,” I admitted. “I just really wanted to find a way to get to know my online kids. I wanted to feel that sort of connection and relationship with them that I once had in the traditional classroom.”

“Well, you do – for some of them. But, you have a lot of kids right now, and honestly, they just need to get through the class. That’s what you’re there to do, now,” he noted.

I suddenly recalled an email I recently received. Earlier that same day, I sent out an email to my students, asking them to send in photos of themselves donning their favorite college football team attire. I wanted to share their photo collage in our opening course slide the following week. I hoped it would encourage the kids to see their “classmates” since they rarely have opportunity to interact with one another, and it would be great to actually “see” my students and learn more about their interests and personalities. Only three students responded.

“One of my students sent me an email that reminds me of what you’re saying. He’s a transfer student. I recently acquired him in my class when his teacher was let go. He responded to an email I sent out asking for photos of favorite college football attire. He said, ‘I don’t have time for these emails. I just want to get through your class and finish. I joined online learning so I wouldn’t have to socialize. Please stop sending these emails to me.’” I recalled the sense of shock that coursed through me having read over his response to my attempt at community building.

“Well, you can’t blame him,” George responded. “I mean, Babe, some of these kids just want to finish this class and move on. They’re not looking for socializing. Now, you will have kids who could use that connection with you. But, a lot of them would be just fine without it,” he added.

I sat back, took another sip of beer, and gazed at the poster on the far living room wall. It was a poster my best friend made for me just a week earlier.

“This is your ‘success poster’,” she had commented the morning she brought it over. “I know you’re completely stressed right now. But, I want you to keep your eyes on the prize,” she smiled, passing the poster to me.

The poster depicted a road to my Ph.D. It showed students on the phone and noted, “Remember, this path to success is temporary. Keep that in mind when things begin to feel stressful.” Next to that, was one of Adalyn’s baby pictures where it stated, “It’s okay to shut off your phone and spend time with your daughter and husband.” At the end of the road were the words, “Congratulations, Dr. Eisenbach!”

“This is for you, to remind you that this is short-term. It’s going to get better. You can make it,” she had stated as she gave me a comforting hug.

I looked away from the poster, and thought to myself, *Could I do this for the rest of my life? Absolutely, not. But, this is the direction education is heading. Don’t we owe it to our students to find ways to be more effective in the online classroom? Don’t I owe it to myself as an online teacher to find a way to make this work?*

“All I know,” stated George, jolting me from my thoughts, “is that something has to give. You can’t keep working 12 hour days. It’s not fair to you, and it’s certainly not fair to me, or Adalyn.”

“I know,” I exclaimed, “but I’m at a loss! I mean, despite my best efforts, I’m just not cutting it right now – as a teacher OR wife and mother.” Once again, I began to cry. “Seriously, George. I just want to walk away from this.”

“And do what?” he asked. “Go back to the classroom? You were just as stressed when you were working there! *And*, you never had time for your doctoral stuff. I really think the trouble is you’re still trying to be the online teacher you were a few months ago, and you just *can’t* be that teacher right now. The harder you try, the worse things get. What about the other teachers? They’re in the same boat, right? How are they doing it?”

I took a moment to consider his question. “Honestly, I don’t really know. I haven’t been successful in really connecting with any of the other teachers. I mean, I recently started talking to Cassandra.”

“Is she another English I teacher?” George asked.

“Yes. We started instant messaging the day of the massive layoffs,” I responded, reaching for a final fork full of spaghetti. “I don’t know how she’s doing it either! She’s a single mom and her kids aren’t in childcare throughout the day. I know she tends to fall a bit behind in grading, but she always manages to catch up. I wonder if she even sleeps, to be honest with you!”

“Well, why not talk to her more? See if she has any advice on what you can do to maybe regain control of your time, and your life? You never know. She might do something that you haven’t tried, yet,” George suggested.

I took a moment and considered his suggestion. *They are always pushing our need to team up together to find a solid work-life balance. Maybe Cassandra has a suggestion. I’ll have to talk with her more about it this week.*

George and I sat in silence for a few minutes.

“You know what else happened today?” I asked, placing my fork down on the now empty plate.

“What?” George asked, taking time to rub my back as I rested my head atop his shoulder.

“One of my students is taking the course to make up a prior grade. She’s been in my class since the beginning, but she’s getting there. I mean, it’s slow going for some of my kids, but I know it’s only because they struggle and need my help for most assignments. This student is one of those students. And, before my roster grew out of control, I had the time to call her every week, catch up on her softball – did I mention she plays for a travelling team? She actually went to the World Series with her team!” I remarked, remembering how she told me about the excitement at visiting Disney with her teammates for the World Series of softball.

“Well, anyway,” I continued, “I noticed she was making great progress over the past couple of weeks. She was submitting work – not the standard three lessons each week – but, it was work, and it was quality. So, I didn’t call her. I figured she didn’t really need my help, and there are *plenty* of other kids right now who need regular calls just to remember to log in and work.”

“Okay,” responded George. “That doesn’t sound bad. That sounds great! It seems like she’s working.”

“She is!” I exclaimed. “But, I had a little time today, so I thought I would call her just to check in and see how things were going. The moment I called, she answered and asked, ‘Mrs. E.! Where have you been? You haven’t called me in a couple of weeks. I was wondering if you were okay.’”

“Well,” stated George, continuing to rub my back in his attempt to offer a sense of solace and comfort. “That’s a good thing! It means she noticed you call her, and she was worried about you.”

“I know, but I still felt bad. I mean, she noticed I haven’t had time to call. I was honest with her. I told her that I have over 200 students now, and having noticed she was making great

progress, I let her be for the moment. She couldn't believe I had so many students! I know we aren't supposed to say such things to our students or parents."

"Say what such things?" George interjected.

"That we have so many kids!"

"Why not? It's the truth."

"Yes. But, we don't want them to feel as though they are just another number or not important in comparison to our other students," I replied.

"Um," George started, "Okay. But, it's the truth. See? The kids don't know what your day looks like. They don't know how many things you're trying to do at the same time. Personally, I don't see anything wrong with telling them the truth."

"I know," I responded, "But, that's the way it is." I took a deep breath, kissed George on the cheek, and reached over for my glass of now tepid beer.

"I also taught a live lesson this morning."

"How did that go?"

"Actually, I loved it! I mean, teaching live lessons is time consuming – don't get me wrong. But, it's the only time in the week when I feel like a teacher. The rest of the time, I feel more like a coach at best, or secretary at worst."

"What did you teach?"

"Today's lesson focused on figurative language. I got a chance to teach the kids about figurative language devices and why authors use them in literature. It was fun! They were all really engaged, and the conversation was outstanding! In fact, there were times when I didn't even have to speak! They completely took control of the lesson – but, in a good way! I mean,

they were encouraging one another, collaborating on activities, and actually asking other students to think more critically about their answers!”

“Sounds great! See?” encouraged George, “That’s a bright spot in what might have been a long, tiresome day.”

“It really was! There was just one thing that bothered me about it. See, the thing is, I don’t teach my own students. Right?”

“What do you mean? I thought it was a live lesson.”

“Well, it is! The thing is, the live lessons are open to *any* English I student. This means that students from all over the department, in a variety of classes, attend the session. Basically, whomever needs it, attends it.”

“Did any of your kids attend today?”

“Actually, yes! One student. She was the first one there! *And*, it gave us time to catch up. She told me she was having trouble with her novel in unit 2. She didn’t understand plot structure. Since the other kids were late in arriving to the live lesson, I actually had a chance to go over plot structure with her one-on-one in the classroom. In fact,” I added, growing excited at the memory of the live lesson from earlier that morning, “it turns out she is a *huge* fan of John Green!”

“Who?” asked George.

“A wonderful writer. Anyway, the point is, she told me she enjoys John Green novels, and of course, so do I! So, we had a fantastic conversation about his work, and I was able to use the plot line of one of his works to help her understand plot structure. It was great!” I exclaimed.

“Well, that sounds wonderful! Why would you say something bothered you?” George asked.

“Well, that’s not what bothered me, obviously,” I shared. “The thing is, there was a student there from another class, and right from the start, he was causing a serious interruption in the lesson. He kept grabbing the microphone to make obscene comments. He would also write negative statements in the comment box. It was not only distracting, it was disrespectful to the other students and myself. And so,” I continued, taking a deep breath, “I removed him from the session.”

“Okay. Well, what else could you do?” George asked.

“Nothing that I’m aware of,” I responded. “At least, not in that moment. I didn’t know the student, and despite my best efforts to speak with him privately about the situation, he wouldn’t stop.”

“Well,” George noted, “that wasn’t your fault. If the kid wasn’t going to listen, you had to continue teaching.”

“Yeah,” I responded. “I emailed his teacher to tell her what happened. Turns out, the student has Asperger’s Syndrome. She said he often acts out in live lessons. So, she’s going to offer him a private lesson to help him earn his collaboration points.”

“Don’t get down on yourself for that,” George noted, rubbing my shoulders. “You had no idea, and no way of knowing that at the time.”

“I know,” I responded. “That’s what sucks! How on earth was I supposed to know that? I mean, he’s not my student! All I know of him when he logs in is his name and teacher’s name – nothing more. If it had been one of my kids, I would have known and handled it differently.”

“Okay,” remarked George, “So you know this now. Next time a kid does that, remember what you’ve learned from this student, and see what you can do differently.”

I took a final sip of my second beer. *I really should have poured a glass of vodka, I thought to myself, Beer just isn't cutting through the stress tonight.*

George took the stein from my hand and placed it atop the coffee table.

“Babe,” he started, “You’re a great teacher. You know it, and I know it. Yes, it’s not fair that you’re facing these challenges right now. And, yes, you are too perfectionistic for your own good. But, you’re doing everything you can to help your kids and do what is required of you for your job. You need to remember that it will *never* be perfect. There will be kids you help, and there will be kids who slip through your fingers.”

He leaned in to kiss my forehead.

“You’re going to burn yourself out at this rate, and you’re missing out on so much time with your family. It’s really not worth all of this stress and anxiety. So, take a deep breath, set your limitations each week, and stick to them. In the meantime, call that girl, what’s her name?”

“Cassandra.”

“Yes, call Cassandra and see if she can offer you advice. Maybe you guys can figure something out together. Tomorrow, you stop working at five. Okay? I want to see you at dinner, and I want to see you spending time with Adalyn.”

*He was right. I had to set limitations, even if it meant my students’ needs weren’t met immediately.*

“Remember what you learned from the start of all of this – there’s nothing that can’t wait.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right,” I responded with a sigh.

“Can you say that again,” George laughed. “I don’t hear that phrase often.”

I playfully smacked his shoulder and gave him another kiss on the cheek.



“Now,” stated George as he reached for the remote control, “let’s stop worrying about work for the day, and watch some mindless television before bed. Sound good?”

“Yes!” I exclaimed, ready to put the day to bed and rest up for what I was sure would be a packed day tomorrow.

### **In Search of a Balance – One Year Later**

**8:00 a.m.**

*I can’t believe it’s been a year,* I thought to myself, pulling on my workout pants and fumbling through my dresser drawer for a clean tank top to wear.

“Mooooommy!” Adalyn called, making her way down the hallway to my bedroom. “Mooooommy! What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just a second, Monster,” I responded, throwing the tank top over my head and hurrying to greet Adalyn at the bedroom door. “I had to get dressed so I can get to the gym after you get to school!”

“Oh!” Adalyn exclaimed, handing me her blankie while she ate the final bite of her pop-tart.

“Come on,” I ushered her into the hall. “Let’s go brush your teeth and get you to school.”

We walked together to her small bathroom, pausing along the way so I could check my computer for any new texts or calls. *No new messages. Awesome!*

Waking up at five to grade and email was providing me the time I needed each morning to not only empty my gradebook and in-box, but I was able to close my computer in time to wake Adalyn and spend an hour enjoying a glass of chocolate milk, breakfast bar, and catch an episode of her new favorite show, “Jungle Junction” on Disney Junior.

*I think I’ve finally got a routine down pat,* I thought to myself, *and it only took a year!*

I brushed Adalyn's teeth, ran a comb through her hair, and put sneakers on her feet. Then, we headed out the door to daycare.

Twenty minutes later, I was on the way to the gym for my daily workout. Thirty minutes of cardio and 15 minutes of weights provided me the chance to not only get into shape, but decompress before starting a new day. But first, I had to call for my daily check in with my new partner in crime, Cassandra.

"Hi!" Cassandra exclaimed as she answered the phone. "One second. Let me put you on my car speakers," she paused. "There. Okay. Can you hear me?"

"Yep!" I responded. "Happy Wednesday!"

Cassandra let out a small laugh. "Happy Wednesday! Ugh! I was late getting Bella to school this morning. Her pre-school teacher is going to hate me," she laughed. "But, I mean, we were only like five minutes behind this morning. Tyler spilled his breakfast all over the kitchen floor and it took a few minutes to calm him down and get things cleaned up before we could leave."

"Oh, I completely understand," I shared. "I'm surprised Adalyn and I made it out the door on time this morning. I actually got so busy emptying my gradebook for you that I lost track of time. I didn't realize it was already eight o'clock and then I heard her shuffling down the hallway," I laughed.

"Right?" Cassandra responded. "I'm telling you! Time just flies by when I'm grading."

"Exactly."

"So, what is the plan for today? I'm on grading duty and you're on calling, right?"

Cassandra and I had the *perfect* teaming schedule worked out. After a bit of tweaking, we came up with a plan that not only benefited our students, but worked to benefit our need for

personal time. Our structured teaming meant that we worked independently on Mondays to grade weekend work and return any calls or emails that came in on Saturday or Sunday. Sure, we were *expected* to be available on weekends to help students with lessons and assignments. But, we both had commitments to our family that would always come first in our lives. For this reason, weekends were simply a non-negotiable. Students in need of assistance would simply have to make time to reach out for help on Monday, instead.

On Tuesdays, I was on “gradebook duty”. This meant, I took over our gradebooks until four – working to ensure all student work was within the 48 hour window of return time (often returned much sooner). I provided students feedback on course assignments, and graded for the both of us. During this time, Cassandra was able to call blitz, meaning she was able to conduct an abundance of outgoing weekly calls – calls to students who weren’t actively working, monthly calls to update parents on student progress, greeting or welcome calls to get to know new students and welcome them to the course, and calls to students who were almost ready to successfully complete the course as a means of encouraging completion.

Wednesdays were my designated calling day. I had the opportunity to reach out to as many students as possible for weekly check-ins and updates. All the while knowing Cassandra was in charge of my gradebook – knowledge that provided me comfort in knowing my students were taken care of while I was busy dialing.

“Yes. I’m going to get in a quick work out before I start my calls. Most of my kiddos aren’t awake before ten anyway – at least my homeschool students.”

“Mine are the same way,” Cassandra shared. “I wish *I* could sleep until noon!” she laughed.

“Me, too,” I responded. “So, I’m going to reach out to my homeschoolers first. Hopefully, by the time I complete my homeschool calls, most of my public schoolers will be home, and I can reach a majority of them rather than speak to one voicemail after the other.”

“Yeah, that’s what I try to do, too,” Cassandra replied. “But, I mean, if I’m just calling with a quick reminder or something, it’s actually helpful to get a voice mail, so I can hurry and get in another call.”

“Exactly!” I explained. “I want to cover as many calls as I can in my calling day, so I can have tomorrow for double coverage.”

Thursdays were my “double coverage” day. Basically, I was both myself *and* Cassandra between the hours of nine and four. I maintained *both* of our gradebooks and took incoming calls for the *both* of us. This way, Cassandra could take on “double coverage” for Friday – my “dissertation day” each week. I was able to really dive into working on my dissertation, knowing that Cassandra was there to assist each student with questions or class assistance.

“Oh, and before I forget,” I suddenly added, “Don’t feel like you have to get to *all* of today’s assignments if you don’t have the time. I’ve been averaging over 70 or 80 assignments a day this week!”

“Wow. Why that many?” Cassandra asked.

“I started my March Madness competition this week,” I responded. “I wanted to find a way to not only encourage the kids to work through Spring Break, but also see the bigger picture in giving back to their community.”

I recalled the way I would once encourage my brick-and-mortar students to grow as altruistic young adults. I wanted to encourage them to think outside themselves, and find ways to give back to others – to approach the world with a sense of empathy and giving. It was much

harder finding ways to encourage such thought in the online classroom, but I was still determined to try.

“We have a student in our class, Susan, who is currently going through a variety of tests at a children’s hospital. They think her cancer may have returned,” I shared.

“Oh, no,” Cassandra replied. “That’s just so awful. I absolutely *hate* hearing about kids who are sick or suffering.”

“Yeah, me, too,” I respond. “But, her family is staying at the Ronald McDonald House while she is in the hospital. I thought for our March Madness competition, I would make a cash donation in our class name to the Ronald McDonald House charities. So, for every student who submits their three assignments each week in March, I am adding to our total cash donation to the charity. After just one week, the total has already reached over thirty dollars. So, it’s working to not only encourage students to log in and work through what might otherwise be a vacation, but it’s for a great cause.”

“I love that,” Cassandra replied. “That’s like the December Challenge I do. I make it into a competition and then make a donation to a local charity based on student work and contributions in the class.”

“Yep!” I shared. “It’s going great! However, I am working my butt off to keep up with the grading. So, just know that if it’s like that in the gradebook, just get to like the first 25 or 30 that are submitted today. I can get to the rest tomorrow or the next day.”

“Got it,” she responded.

“I’m so happy we have this teaming structure,” I confessed to Cassandra. “I mean, just six months ago, I thought I was drowning. I literally thought there was absolutely no way I would ever have time for anything but work. Even then, no matter how much time I devoted to

my job, it wasn't enough to get through everything I needed to accomplish each week, or assist every student who needed help, much less even think about working on my dissertation study.”

“I know!” Cassandra agreed. “I'm so glad we're finally back down to a manageable class size!”

My roster was finally resting between 140 and 160. I once again had the time to reach out to my students each week *and* make time for my family and myself.

“And what's awesome is I feel like we know *both* of our kids, and our kids know the both of us,” Cassandra added. “I mean, when you tell me about Nathan, I know who you're talking about and I can recall what I've seen in the gradebook or what I've heard from him on the phone.”

“Exactly,” I responded. “I actually tell students during the welcome call that they have two English teachers. This way, they know right from the start that we are *both* their teacher – that we're working together each week so they have two people they can count on for help in the class.”

“Yep!” answered Cassandra. “And we haven't really had too much push back. I mean, there have been the few kids' parents who have complained that our grading ‘doesn't match up’, but other than that, I think it's going well!”

“Me, too,” I shared. “Honestly, I am so unbelievably happy we connected and that we just click so well. I think we make a perfect team!”

“Oh, me, too,” laughed Cassandra.

“Okay, well, I'm going to hurry inside so I can work out and make it home to start calls by ten. Just call me or instant message me if you need anything today.”

“Okay,” Cassandra replied. “I have a parent I need to call back about her kid. He hasn’t worked in a few weeks, so I dropped him on Monday. She wants him reinstated. So, I need to talk to her about it, and see why he wasn’t working.”

“Yeah, I have one of those to return, too,” I shared. “Remember Jared? He’s the one who would refuse to call me for help on his essay, and instead of returning my calls or emails for tutoring just stopped working on it?” I asked.

“Yeah. I think I remember him. He kept turning in the same file over and over without revising, right?”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “I have no problem adding him back, but he will need to agree to the learning plan. Otherwise, it will just be more of the same – no work for weeks- refusal to call me for help – drop – reinstate.”

“Exactly!” Cassandra agreed.

“Drives me crazy! I mean, how hard do I have to work to try and get you on the phone to help you? Drives me nuts that the *only* email they seem to ever receive is the notice of a withdrawal. What about the ten emails I sent to see why you weren’t working? Funny how your email and phone seem to suddenly work again!” I added.

“I know,” Cassandra sighed. “That drives me crazy, too.”

“But, no, please let me drop everything to accommodate you *NOW* that you’ve decided you actually need to finish the class. Geesh!” I exclaimed. I could feel my blood pressure begin to rise just thinking about Jared and my attempts to help.

“And you know what pisses me off the most?” I asked, now finding my voice raising in frustration.

“The fact you put in more time and effort for some of these kids than they are willing to put in on their own?” Cassandra asked.

“Well, yes, that,” I laughed. “But, even more is the fact that I drop a kid and then a parent is all over the phone, upset that I dropped their kid from the class, and I’m stuck wondering, *Where were you for the last month?* I mean, do they seriously think I just sat back, watched their kid drop off the radar and then eagerly said, ‘Woo-hoo! I can drop you now!’ I mean, it’s just ridiculous.”

“Oh, I know!” exclaimed Cassandra. “I get that, too. It’s the whole customer service aspect of this job. We go above and beyond to try and help a kid out, but let someone complain once and just like that they’re back in the class and nothing changes.”

I took a moment to breathe.

“Okay, I’m really going to go inside now. I have a line of calls to do today and then my phone quiz hours start at two. I have several kids planning to call for a quiz today.”

“Okay! Enjoy your workout. I’m sure I’ll talk to you on messenger later,” responded Cassandra.

As we hung up the phone, I grabbed my towel and gym card, stepped out of the car, and headed inside the gym.

**10:00 a.m.**

An hour later, I was home, showered, and ready to return to work. I checked my Google voice for any missed messages. In recent months, I gave up on having a separate phone line for work. Rather, google voice, a free calling system provided online, offered me the chance to conduct calls from the computer and eliminate the “missed calls” from my hectic day. Instead of



hearing a phone ring incessantly each day, I was alerted with a single bell chime whenever I received a text message or voice mail.

*If they want a return call, they can learn online etiquette and leave a message, I thought to myself.*

I no longer had the time or energy to try and return every missed call every time one would come through. It was much more manageable to require a phone message and return messages during my return call block of time each day.

*Chunking my time has really been a life saver, I considered, thinking over what I learned in the past year and how much my daily routine had changed. If a student calls for assistance, I will return the call during my return call period. I just can't stop everything I'm already doing every time the phone rings. When I tried doing that, I felt overwhelmed and never seemed to accomplish anything in the gradebook. Now, I know how each hour of the day is designated. I can spend time from ten to two working on outgoing calls, and return incoming voice messages and assessments from two to five.*

Already, I had a call from Jason's mom for a monthly contact (*I can just text her back. He's doing fine. He has an A and seems to be working consistently*), a voice mail from Bridget for help in unit three (*I will call her at two. Cassandra's grading today anyway. I will call Bridget after I take a look at Cassandra's grading feedback*), and a message from Dillon (*Aw, Dillon already called today. I will call him in a minute. Then, I really do need to start on my scheduled outgoing calls*).

I opened my daily spreadsheet so I could keep an accurate track of my calls, call attempts, and student priority. Completed calls were color coded green, attempts were in yellow, and students at risk of drop were coded red. A single sweep of my spreadsheet informed me of

which students I already spoke with this week, which students seemed to avoid my call attempts, and which students were in need of immediate call assistance.

Dillon was going to be first on my list. He was a “chronic caller” – a student who called almost daily for help on his lessons. Most days, I enjoyed chatting with him. However, there were always days when I felt more overwhelmed than others and resented the amount of time I had to dedicate to this single student – time that I needed to assist other students or prepare for my live lesson.

After a couple of months in the class, I could pinpoint where Dillon would struggle, and I knew the exact talking points I would make to help him through the day’s lesson. Whenever possible, I would infuse football into the discussion to assist him in really grasping a key concept. *Thank God I’m a football fan*, I thought to myself.

I dialed Dillon’s house phone. He picked up on the second ring.

“Hi, Mrs. E,” he answered.

“Hi, Dillon. How are you today?” I asked.

“I’m good. How about yourself?” he responded.

“I’m good,” I automatically responded.

“Good,” he answered.

“How can I help you today?” I asked, flipping the television channel to HGTV and pressing “mute”.

“Well,” he started, “I’m having trouble with lesson 2.02”

“Okay,” I responded, noting that Property Brothers was on today. *I love this show*, I thought to myself. “What exactly is causing you trouble in this lesson?”

“I don’t understand what they want me to do,” he shared.

“Okay, well this is a background activity. We want to see that you can use the research articles we provide to you to formulate responses to the questions on the assignment.”

“Oh, okay,” he stammered.

“So, basically, you’re learning background information for the novel you’re reading. Which book did you pick?” I asked.

“Oh, um, *The Diary of Anne Frank*,” he answered.

“Awesome choice,” I replied. I knew Dillon struggled in his reading comprehension. If he had not selected this particular novel from the list of options, I would have recommended it to him. I knew it represented the lowest lexile level of the novel selections.

“So, for this assignment, you want to read the articles in the lesson that talk about the Holocaust. Do you know what the Holocaust was?” I asked.

“Um,” he paused. “Not really.”

*Wow. I thought to myself. If only I was in the brick-and-mortar classroom with him. There are so many resources and lessons I could infuse into the class to help him really understand the significance of this moment in history!*

I recalled how I would once work with the history teacher at my brick-and-mortar school to craft units in which students were learning about the history of the Holocaust while reading about it in my classroom.

*Those days are gone now, I thought to myself. I have absolutely zero control over the curriculum in this course. However, it was turning that way in my brick-and-mortar class, too. I can’t forget about the influx of scripted curriculum just as I prepared to leave.*

“Okay, well that makes this particular lesson even that more important,” I responded.

“You have to really understand the time period and what people were experiencing in the

Holocaust to understand the novel. I want you to take your time with this assignment, okay?" I asked.

"Okay," he responded.

"So do this for me," I added. "I want you to do a couple of additional things. Now, I know it's not on the assignment list, and I know it's going to require more time," I admit. "But, I think it's important that you learn more about this time period before you really engage in the novel. Okay?" I asked.

"Um, okay," he stammered.

I could sense the hesitation in his voice. *Of course he doesn't want to do MORE work, I thought to myself. In what world would a kid be excited to hear that they now have to work harder and spend more time on a subject in which they struggle?*

"Okay, so I want you to do two things. First, I want you to download the note-taking guide for the lesson. Use that to take notes on the key concepts from the lesson itself," I started.

"Okay," Dillon answered.

"Then, I want you to work on the reading comprehension strategy we used on your short story from unit one. I want you to print out the articles from lesson 2.02. Do you have a printer?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "But, my dad can print it for me at his work."

"Great," I responded. "Okay, so have your dad print the articles. Then, I want you to write *all* over it! Read the articles through in their entirety once. Then, go back a second time and this time mark the text. Remember from last time, you want to highlight areas that you think are important or confusing. Then, write your questions and thoughts all over the margin. Okay?" I asked.

“Yes. I remember,” he noted. I could hear the frustration already rising in his voice.

“Dillon,” I started, “I know this isn’t what you want to do, but I really think – no, I *know* this is going to help you understand the articles for this assignment. Okay?” I asked.

“Yep,” he answered.

“Okay, now, is your dad there?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he responded. “Hold on. I will get him.”

“Thanks,” I answered.

A moment later, Dillon’s dad was on the line.

“Good morning,” I exclaimed. “This is Mrs. E. from English I. I just wanted to update you on Dillon’s class progress.”

“Okay,” he responded.

“Dillon is working on a background activity right now for his novel in unit two. He’s having a bit of trouble with the assignment, and I’m worried that he needs a deeper understanding of the Holocaust to really grasp what he’s going to encounter in the novel he selected for this unit,” I shared.

“Okay,” Mr. Smith answered.

“So, I’ve asked that he use the reading comprehension strategy we used last time to help him understand the articles in this unit. Can you possibly print the articles for him so he has a hard copy to highlight and write on for this assignment?” I asked.

“Certainly,” Mr. Smith responded. “I can do that today.”

“Great!” I responded.

“Otherwise,” Mr. Smith inquired, “how is he doing? I know he’s been in this class for a longer time than we anticipated.”

It was true that Dillon was in the course longer than most students. After 18 weeks, he was only halfway through the semester course. But, Dillon was a hard worker. He called every day for help and was never afraid of revising and resubmitting work to improve his grade and mastery of the material.

“Yes, he is taking a bit longer than expected,” I shared, “But, he’s a hard worker and I appreciate the fact he reaches out to me for help. So many students try to make it through the course on their own when they could benefit from teacher assistance now and again.”

“Okay,” Mr. Smith responded.

“Now,” I added, “I will tell you, that the third unit of this class is the toughest. He’s likely to struggle with it as it requires a level of text analysis that I feel he has yet to master.”

Mr. Smith waited for me to continue.

“I was wondering,” I commented, “is there any possible way that Dillon might be able to secure a tutor for this course? Someone who can come into your home and work with him on his lessons?”

“Um,” started Mr. Smith, “We haven’t really thought about that. I’m not sure.”

“Okay, well, the reason I ask is I noticed that Dillon is currently registered for the second semester of this course.”

“Yes. He needs both semesters,” Mr. Smith noted.

“Okay, well,” I stammered. I always hated informing parents that their child would not be successful in this learning format. “I don’t know that Dillon is going to be able to make it on his own in the second semester. I’ve noticed how hard he struggles in the current semester to earn a ‘C’. I mean, he works harder than possibly any other student on my roster. But, it’s a serious

struggle for him to maintain a passing grade. Our second semester is even harder than the first. I am honestly worried that if he is left on his own, he simply won't be able to do it."

Silence.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Smith inquired further.

"I mean, Dillon is a great kid. He is always willing to reach out for help, and I do my best to provide the assistance he needs. Right now, we speak almost daily. But, I worry that won't be enough on the second semester. He really needs a teacher who is right there, who can provide him additional resources, one-on-one attention, and even alter the curriculum or reading material to meet his reading level and needs. I can't do that. I don't have that kind of flexibility in this position," I shared.

"For instance, our second semester involves two essays. It involves heavy textual analysis, and it involves a level of comprehension that is far beyond his current demonstrated ability. If you are able to hire a private tutor, that person can provide a more hands-on approach to learning that I simply can't provide from this distance. I worry if he is on his own, he may never make it." I waited for the shoe to drop.

"I see," Mr. Smith responded. "Well, that is definitely something for us to consider. I appreciate you letting me know. Do you happen to know how I might find such a tutor?" he inquired.

"Honestly," I admitted, "I don't. I know that parents in the past had success by searching their local paper or even posting on their Facebook that their child needed a tutor. Do you have a Facebook account?" I asked.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Well, we appreciate all of your help. Let me know if there’s anything else I need to do or anything I need to know. I appreciate your weekly progress reports. It helps us keep track of how he’s doing.”

Every Sunday morning, I would wake up before George and Adalyn so that I could send out a weekly progress report to every parent and student email address on file. It took time to create and email the reports every Sunday morning, but I found that it really helped cut down on the number of students who were not working in my course. Parents seemed to respond positively to the weekly updates and worked to encourage their kids to submit work when they noted a lack of work for that particular week.

“No problem!” I exclaimed. “I’m glad you find them helpful.”

“Okay,” Mr. Smith sighed. “Anything else?”

“Nope! He’s making progress! I’m proud of him,” I shared.

“Me, too,” Mr. Smith added. “Okay, well, let me put you back on the phone with Dillon. One second.”

A moment later, Dillon was back on the phone.

“Hi, Mrs. E.,” he stated.

“Hi, Dillon. Okay. So, do you need anything else today?” I asked.

“Not right now,” he stated. “Thank you!”

“Of course!” I exclaimed. “Anytime.”

With that, we ended the call. *On to the next call*, I thought to myself, glancing at my “to-do” list for the day.



**1:00 p.m.**

As the hours ticked by, I found myself in the phone calling zone. I was making calls, leaving messages, and tackling my to-do list in record time. I was on a roll. While several calls went immediately to voice mail, I had the chance to catch up with a few students who needed classroom assistance.

Before I knew it, it was after one. *And yet another day without a timely lunch*, I thought to myself. I took a moment to check my voice mails and noted three voice messages awaiting review. *I'll check them later*, I thought to myself. *I need to eat!*

After pillaging the fridge and raiding the kitchen cabinets for any semblance of a proper meal, I decided it was time for a drive-through run. I checked the clock. *I've got at least a half hour before my call appointments start for the evening – plenty of time to run out for a burger.*

I snatched up my purse and car keys and headed out for the double cheeseburger I knew would negate the morning's workout session.

A half hour and belly fuller, I returned to my computer to listen to the voicemails I received that morning.

While the first two messages were call attempts for help on a classroom assignment, the third call caused my stomach to drop and my face to burn hot red.

“Um, yes, this is Mrs. Frances,” noted Mark's mother. “And, I just wanted to call and say that I am so fed up with you! My son has tried for two weeks to submit his unit five essay, and you keep sending it back for more revisions. I am tired of your attempts to have him do the same thing over and over again. It's obvious that he can't please you. You are the first online teacher we have had who has required his work to be submitted so much and I think you are awful! I will be letting everyone know to avoid your class” I could hear Mark's voice in the background.

“Yeah,” his mother responded to his inaudible commentary, “I will be contacting your principal today and requesting a new teacher!” she yelled into the receiver, “We have *never* had so much trouble with a teacher before. *You are ridiculous!* I have always thought this whole online learning thing was a joke and now you’ve just proven it to be true. *Anyone* could do your job. You serve *no real purpose!* *You are a joke!* You need to call me, now! Bye.” With that, the voice mail came to an end.

I closed my computer, grabbed my personal cell phone, and walked out my front door. The air was still a bit crisp for a March afternoon. I took a deep breath and began to silently count to ten as I dialed my lead teacher.

Her phone went straight to voicemail. “Hi! You’ve reached Mrs. de Castro, lead teacher for the English I department...”

*Shit!*

I waited, stamping my foot on the concrete sidewalk with my impatience.

“Allison! I need you to call me. I am *pissed!* I just had the absolute worst parent call of all time, and I’m about to lose my shit. Please call me!” I shouted into the voice mail before hanging up.

*What the fuck!?!?* I thought to myself. *I’m the worst!?!? Really!?!?!*

My mind was reeling. *I have to calm down,* I thought to myself. *I have call appointments coming up in just a few minutes. I have students I still need to call back to help in the course, and I cannot call while I feel like this.*

I quickly dialed Cassandra, praying she would answer.

“Hey,” she started. “I’m about to get into your gradebook. My mom had an appointment this morning and so she couldn’t watch Tyler and...” I cut her off.

“I am *pissed!*” I shouted into the phone.

“What? What happened?” she asked.

“You know Mark, right?” I asked.

“Mark, Mark... remind me,” she responded.

“Okay. He’s the kid who transferred to me from Amanda when she took that job change. He hadn’t worked in a few weeks, had an F, but I got him back on track in class.”

“I think I remember,” Cassandra noted. “Why? What happened?”

“Okay, so the kid comes to me failing the class, right?”

“Right...”

“Okay, so yeah, he’s been in the class longer than he should, but he’s finally at a ‘B’ and he has just a few lessons left to wrap up the segment. Well, his mom called me today and you should hear what she said.”

“What? What?” Cassandra probed.

“She left me an angry voicemail and said that I am a joke, that anyone can do my job, and that they basically hate me,” I responded, tears of frustration pouring down my face.

“What?!?!” Cassandra responded. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope!” I exclaimed. “I have *never* had a parent speak to me like that. I am literally shaking right now I am so unbelievably hurt,” I answered, looking down at my trembling hands. “I had to walk out of my house to breathe.”

“Wow!” Cassandra replied. “What are you going to do? I wouldn’t even call her back. I wouldn’t! Why should you? We don’t deserve to be treated that way!”

“I know!” I exclaimed. “Cassandra, I am so beyond pissed!! I swear to God, I give *so much* of myself to these kids and this job. I can’t tell you how many nights I get into an argument

with George because I'm still on the phone instead of spending time with him and Adalyn. And for what? So I can be berated by a woman who knows nothing about me? She thinks anyone can do my job? I'd love to see them try! Are you kidding me??"

"Brooke," Cassandra noted. "I completely agree. I'm telling you, we thought we had no respect as classroom teachers, it's like ten times worse as online teachers. I swear people think we sit on our ass all day and eat bon-bons... wait, do they make bon-bons anymore?"

I couldn't help but laugh.

"But, you know what I mean," she continued. "They don't know how many hours we actually put into this job each and every day, how hard we work to keep kids on track, or help them in the class. They have no idea. She's just an angry parent who went off on your voicemail."

"I know," I replied between sobs, "But, I am so *pissed*, Cassandra! I mean, I am really hurt. I have worked so hard to help Mark make it in this class. I helped him move from an 'F' to a 'B'. He is working every week, and he is showing improvement. Yes, I get it. It *sucks* to have to revise work and resubmit it over and over again. I get it! But, I'm not just going to pass him along and pretend he gets it when he doesn't!"

I was completely in tears. I felt as though I was riding an emotional rollercoaster. One minute, I was happy assisting Dillon with his work in unit two. The next, I was listening to a woman verbally berate me in front of her child.

I heard my phone beep and looked down to see that Allison was calling me.

"I'm going to call you back. Allison is calling me," I shared.

"Okay," Cassandra replied. "Call me as soon as you get off the phone with her. I want to know what she says."

Ten minutes and a walk around the block later, Allison had managed to talk me off the ledge and calm my frizzled nerves.

“Brooke,” she stated, “Did she have a right to talk to you like that? No. Absolutely not. That was uncalled for, and I can’t blame you for getting pissed. But, you’re allowing this woman and her obvious hormonal imbalance to get the best of you!”

I let out a slight laugh.

“Don’t call her back. I don’t think anything good will come of it. I will call her, and set her straight on things,” Allison promised. “In the meantime, don’t answer her calls, and forward any emails to me and John. If she wants a new teacher, I’m sure he will be happy to move her to someone else.”

“Yeah, so she can just become someone else’s problem,” I commented.

“Well, maybe seeing that a different teacher has the same expectations will let her see that it’s not you – it’s the curriculum,” Allison noted. “Or, she might get a teacher who just doesn’t care that her son is successful and simply passes him along as she wants. Either way, it’s no longer a stress on your shoulders.”

“Okay,” I responded. “It just pisses me off that I worked so hard to help him actually *understand* the material – not just complete it and move along – and this is what I get in return.”

“Well,” Allison interjected, “some people don’t value education in the same way. And, maybe she’s just so tired of seeing him struggle and barely progress that they give up. That seems to be a recurring problem with this course. Teachers want to see students succeed, but it often requires a lot of revision for the students. The students and parents get frustrated and complain that they have to keep doing the same work over and over again,” Allison sighed. “I

don't know. But, I'm going to call her today and get to the bottom of it for you. You need to get back to the students who actually want your help."

"Yeah," I muttered, opening the front door to return to the confines of my home office.

"I'm late on a few appointment calls. I need to get back to it. Thanks for calming me down."

"Of course!" she exclaimed. "That's why I'm here! I will message you later to fill you in on any further conversation I have with her today."

"Thanks," I responded. With that, I hung up the phone and returned to my laptop to check on the call appointments that slipped by while I was away.

### **5:00 p.m.**

Three hours and several phone calls later, I had finally managed to return every voicemail and at least attempt every scheduled phone quiz. Justine failed once again to answer during her scheduled appointment. This was the third appointment for a phone quiz she had missed in recent weeks.

*It's time to suspend her,* I thought to myself as I moved her to the classroom suspension list and blocked her access to the course. *I can only call so many times before I simply have to force her to call me back. The phone quizzes are a course requirement. If I can't get her on the phone to complete it, I will simply force her to reach out to me for the quiz this week.*

I wasn't sure why Justine was avoiding my calls, but assumed, as with so many students, that she was simply nervous about completing her first phone quiz in the course. *Once she completes this first assessment, she'll see they're not as bad as she anticipates. That's what always seems to happen.*

I glanced up at the kitchen clock and noticed it was almost five.

*Time to wrap things up for the day!* I thought to myself with a sense of anticipation at heading out to pick up my little girl from daycare. I had worked until eight the night before, providing time for evening calls and phone quizzes with my public school students, and additional time for welcome calls to newly enrolled students. *Just two more calls to complete, and that will be it for the evening!*

I made a quick outgoing call attempt to Bridget. I didn't have a chance to check in with her last week, as she was busy with rehearsals for her upcoming school drama production. She took on a speaking role this time, something she had once avoided due to her school and extra-curricular commitments. Honestly, I wondered how she managed to balance her traditional school, virtual courses, and drama while maintaining an A average in the course.

Her voicemail picked up. "Hi, Bridget," I stated. "It's Mrs. E. I just wanted to call and check in with you this week! I am so eager to hear how your opening night went yesterday! I also wanted to check in and see if you're planning to submit your work for me this week. I know you were crazy busy with rehearsals last week. You were missed in class! Give me a call when you get a minute tomorrow. I'd love to hear about things. Thanks!"

*One call left!*

I decided to make my final call attempt from my cell as I headed out to pick Adalyn up from another day of school.

Once again, the phone rang and rang. I allowed it to ring for two minutes in the hopes that someone would pick up. But, it was to no avail. It seemed no matter what time of day I called, or how often I sent a follow-up text or email, Ana was simply not going to answer.

*There's nothing more I can do,* I thought to myself. I had been trying to reach Ana for a month. She failed to respond to emails, texts, and call attempts. According to the online database,

she had not accessed the course in over a month, and her call log history noted how her other teachers were also met with unanswered requests for information and coursework.

I knew Ana had other things on her mind. Shortly after she was placed in my class, she learned that her cancer had returned. She was trying to maintain her coursework and grades between weekly hospital visits and rounds of chemo. Her parents were usually helpful in assisting me with keeping her on track, and encouraging her to work each week. But, in the past month, I lost all communication with Ana and her parents. No one answered calls. There was no voice mail option provided on her phone, and her engagement in the course ceased.

I was grateful that the online education program provided students like Ana the opportunity to continue in their education when they were unable to attend a brick-and-mortar school, but it killed me that I had no way of knowing what was going on, or how I could help her.

*There's nothing else I can do,* I repeated to myself. All attempts at communication had failed. It was time to withdraw Ana from the course.

*I will put her in for a medical withdrawal,* I thought to myself as I pulled into the daycare parking lot. *This way, it won't affect her transcripts. I can freeze her gradebook, and if she returns to the course, she can pick up where she left off.*

I hated the thought of dropping Ana from the class, but without a clear line of communication, I felt I had no other option. I only hoped she would resurface. I was worried about her. I hoped she was okay, but my heart continued to convince me otherwise.

I hurried into the daycare, eager to give Adalyn a hug and a kiss, thankful that my child was healthy and happy.



*There are simply things more important than work*, I considered, thinking of Ana and her family. *Work is over for the day*, I smiled as I entered Adalyn's classroom.

"Mommy! Look!" she exclaimed, holding up her lego tower.

"Wow! That's awesome!" I responded, hurrying over to give her a hug.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Epilogue

I can't believe it's been nearly two years since I walked away from my brick-and-mortar classroom to join the realm of online education. I'd be lying if I didn't say that there are still days I wake up, roll over in bed, and wish I could reconsider my decision to leave the middle school classroom. Yet, I continue to push forward in search of ways to be a more effective online teacher and assist my online learners. After all, the world is headed in the direction of online education. We owe it to our online learners to find ways to effectively address their developmental and individual needs as we grow in our knowledge of online education.

And so, I find that each and every day, I wonder, what can I do better today, than what I accomplished yesterday? How am I addressing the individual needs of my students? Where am I falling short? Do I strive to demonstrate care? Am I successful in my attempts?

At the same time, I continue to wonder, how can I establish a stronger work/life balance? Am I caring enough for myself and my family?

And finally, I sit and question who I am as a teacher. In transitioning to the virtual classroom, what have I learned about myself as an educator? Where do I see the meaning of what it means to be a "teacher" going, as we continue to transition to this new learning platform?

Over the course of this study, I was reminded of the joy I experienced in helping students who were limited in their ability to attend a traditional school setting, accomplishment when a student finally "got it" and overcame a personal struggle in coursework, and pride at the number of students who successfully completed the course to earn the credit necessary for graduation. In

this way, I found myself face-to-face with a teacher who continued to reflect and grow as an online instructor – someone who often fell short of her dreams to enact care, but who continued to press forward in search of ways to infuse such care with her online learners.

While working through the drafting, revising, sharing, and finalizing of my Chapter Four narratives, I was reminded of not only how far I've come in my experience as an online teacher, but of all the students and parents I've encountered along the way. I was forced to recollect stories of student success, and stories of my own limitations as a virtual teacher. I relived moments of frustration over failed attempts at communication, anxiety regarding the hours I would spend hunched over a computer screen – missing out on countless moments with my husband and daughter, and aggravation at the limitations in what I once perceived would be an incredibly flexible job. I found myself face-to-face with a teacher who simply disappointed my former, optimistic self – a teacher who no longer believed she could reach each and every child, a teacher who accepted that online learning simply wasn't for everyone, a teacher who knew she could not be satisfied in the virtual teacher role – at least not as it currently stands. Finally, I found myself gazing into Nodding's relational care (2012) outside the intentions of the study as I noted that relational care extended between colleagues and within my own family unit, my demonstrated focus on academics over personal relationships, and my personal sense of identity as an educator through a need for reciprocity through personal validation.

As I sat in Panera at the local mall, writing what I hoped would be the final version of my Chapter Five, I couldn't help but glance up at a small group of teen girls who sat just two tables over. Their laughter caught my attention, causing me to pause momentarily and peer around the dining area.

*I wonder if any of those girls are my students, I couldn't help but think to myself. I wouldn't know it if they were. I don't know the faces of the hundreds of students who have passed through my online class. Would they know me if they saw me?*

### **Findings**

The heart of autoethnographic narrative inquiry lies in the verisimilitude of the text (Ellis, 2004), and the writer's ability to engage the reader in a conversation as a means of understanding a greater, cultural experience (Bochner, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). While the students you have encountered throughout my study are composite characters (Clough, 2002), constructed to represent the many individual students I encountered and discussed in my personal journal entries, and the storylines are in themselves fictitious, it is my hope that my narratives will speak to the heart and mind of those who read them – forcing the reader to ask, “How honest is this text?” and “How does this experience speak to my own experience as a teacher in search of a caring relationship with my students?”

No two readings of a single text will render the same verdict. As a co-creator of meaning, you will walk away from our encounter together with your own thoughts, insights, judgments, and interpretations (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012). Yet, in sharing my experience as a novice online teacher in search of relational care in the classroom, I, too, walk away from my encounter with the text in a meaningful, reflective way. I search for signs of what Nodding's deems “relational care” in terms of my own ability to listen, reflect, and respond to the individual needs of my virtual learners, as well as my colleagues and family – intended or not (Noddings, 2012). I engage in the stories shared of my first year in the virtual classroom – stories of personal growth, limitation, and connection – with a reflective, critical eye. At times, I discover my abilities as an online teacher to both note and meet the needs of my virtual students. At other

times, I find my focus on caring for myself and my family – meeting my personal goals and familial commitments - outweigh the needs of my students. And finally, I discover the limitations in my ability to truly care for my students set in place by both my educational organization, the separation of time and space, and my own need to find an effective way to manage my time and achieve a comfortable work/life balance.

In evaluating the complete narratives, I was struck by the recurring themes that emerged – themes that addressed aspects of relational care from teacher to student. I identified these themes as: teacher presence, dialogue, observation, tailored instruction, personalized learning, and student recognition. I was also able to identify non-examples of each theme within my experience as a virtual teacher. Figure 6 below demonstrates the themes I noted within my narratives, and the way in which they align with Nodding’s theory of relational care (2012).

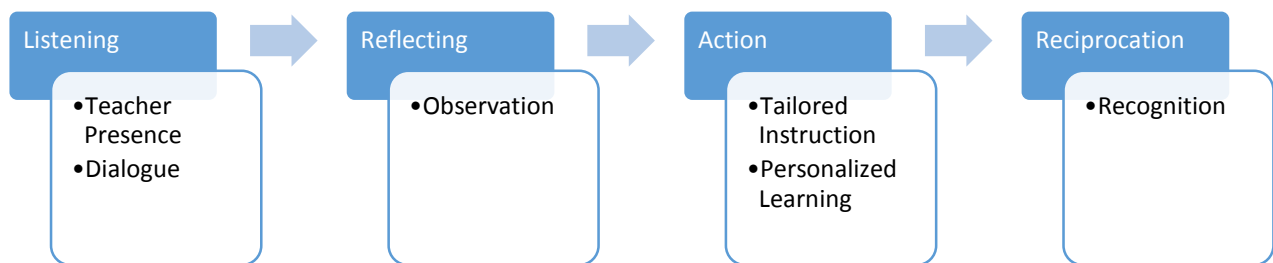


Figure 6. Emergent themes of relational care.

### Theme 1: Teacher Presence

To begin, I identified the theme of teacher presence in establishing relational care with online learners. By teacher presence, I refer to the need for the teacher to be available and accessible to students as they work within the virtual course. For example, Dillon’s character and situation represented students in need of a “present” teacher – someone available for regular

assistance in the course. Dillon's character was composed of a variety of students who took the initiative to reach out for assistance on a regular basis – students who initiated contact through phone, text, email, or Skype to obtain the help they needed to successfully navigate the course. Such students needed a teacher available to assist them with coursework in a regular and timely manner. In following the understanding that relational care requires the carer take time to listen, reflect, and act on the expressed need (Noddings, 2012), teacher presence provided me opportunity to listen to the expressed needs of my students. My presence, though not physical in nature, provided students opportunity to express an immediate need and establish open communication.

Yet, at the same time, I am struck by the instances in which it seems my stories are divergent rather than parallel to themes of relational care. For instance, Marcus and Justine were characters who demonstrated a failure to gain teacher presence at the moment of need. Whether the result of separation by time and space, or a personal decision to ignore the phone in lieu of my own private or familial needs, students were often unable to establish an immediate synchronous connection with me for necessary assistance in the course.

Considering Marcus, it was not uncommon that I would reach out to offer assistance, and find myself speaking to a voicemail rather than a student. In turn, my time chunking assisted me in accomplishing daily tasks, but often hindered students in getting in touch with me for immediate help. With attention to Justine, there were times I had to rely on classroom suspensions in an attempt to “force” students on the phone for classroom assistance. There were also times in which I would admit defeat after failed attempts to establish presence. For example, when I found myself unable to connect with a student in my six-month narrative, I simply informed him via voice mail that he was to be withdrawn from the class. While this did initiate a

call from his parent, it was not the type of call I sought to achieve a connection. Rather, the angry voice message from the student's mother only further demonstrated a lack of relational care and connection between myself and the student. It seemed that while I was often able to recognize a student need for assistance (through work, or perhaps the lack of classroom engagement), I struggled in establishing an immediate presence to provide that assistance – whether the result of my own time limitations, or the student's failure to reach out or respond to my attempts at providing assistance.

## **Theme 2: Dialogue**

A second theme I was identified within my study was that of dialogue. I sought to establish relational care by initiating dialogue, maintaining clarity and quality during teacher to student communication, being prompt in providing a response to student contact or request for support, being accessible to students, and engaging in self-disclosure. In this way, I was able to note expressed needs, and reflect on ways to respond (Noddings, 2012). Throughout conversations with my lead teacher and my husband, I revealed my eagerness to maintain open, continuous dialogue with students in an attempt to listen, and know my students so that I could assist them with individual needs in the course. Whether my calls were attempts at encouraging student work, or simply to catch up on student experiences outside of school, successful attempts at establishing dialogue provided me the opportunity to learn more about my students, and in turn, find additional ways to assist them in the course. For instance Bridget, and Brittany were characters who represented a personal connection I sought to establish with students. By taking time to listen and understand a student's drama schedule, I was able to learn more about her personal interests and character. In addition, I was aware of outside demands for her time and attention – demands that might affect her ability to work in the course in a given week. Bridget

represented students who were successful in navigating the course with minimal teacher assistance. As a result, attempts at continuous dialogue usually resulted in discussions that encouraged personal disclosure and relationship-building more so than tutoring or assistance with coursework. While Brittany's story began with extreme frustration, our dialogue provided opportunity to establish a personalized approach to the course that eased her worry, and worked within both of our schedules to provide the weekly assistance she required within the class.

However, once again, hindrances such as familial or educational obligations, limitations on my time and focus, in addition to an increase in student enrollment often left me falling short of establishing the dialogue I hoped to achieve when I first joined the virtual classroom. In fact, as the enrollment increased, I often found myself exchanging the quality of communication for the quantity of calls I could achieve in a given day. As shared in my conversation with Cassandra, I began to find that voice mails were a welcome reprieve from conversation, as I sought ways to complete the necessary outgoing calls expected each week in the course. I would even reach out to my public school students during school hours, knowing I was likely to reach a voice messaging system rather than a student, so I could leave a quick reminder message and continue on with my to-do list for the day. I also elected for a phone system that would eliminate the consistent ringing, and provide a reprieve from calls throughout the day.

There were also students who simply did not wish to establish a dialogue or cultivate a strong rapport with me. Just as in a traditional brick-and-mortar setting, some students did not seek a personal bond or relationship with the teacher. As educators, we may not connect with every student who passes through our classroom door. The online world is no different. There were characters who represented students who simply want to move forward in the class, complete their work, and earn the credit necessary for graduation. Such students often neglected



to answer my calls, respond to emails, or reach out to me unless they had a specific question concerning a lesson or assignment. They would often progress through the course in a short duration of time, and complete the class without a strong personal connection or relationship with classmates, or me. They did not engage in my attempts at forming a stronger classroom community, and would sometimes request that communication attempts be limited to those things which were imperative to their success in completing the course.

Finally, there were students who failed to establish necessary dialogue, thereby causing them to lose their place in the course. Jared represents a character who demonstrated a need for course assistance, but neglected to establish necessary dialogue to gain the assistance needed to proceed in the class. Despite my attempts to establish dialogue, students must also strive to return contact to ensure a teacher-student connection. Ana represented a similar situation, in which struggles outside the classroom can keep a student from establishing necessary dialogue with the teacher. Unfortunately, my limited outlets for contact can hinder me from knowing what is going on in the life of a student, and prohibit my ability to identify an expressed need. When students failed to return my attempts at contact, thereby limiting their ability to move forward in the course, they were withdrawn from the class.

### **Theme 3: Observation**

Throughout my narratives, I found ways to remain observant of student behavior and demonstrated needs as a means of consideration and reflection on student needs. For example, there were characters who represented the group of students who I observed worked each week to press forward in the course, but perhaps required a bit of praise and encouragement to maintain growth and self-confidence. I took note of students who struggled in particular lessons, and strived to identify ways to assist them in not only mastering course material, but finding

confidence in their abilities as learners. I would use what I learned through observations to tailor my communication and instructional attempts to meet the needs of my students. Whether this meant implementing and utilizing a “student of the week” incentive to encourage a struggling student, or sending a personalized video email to encourage students to complete the course, I took time to examine student interaction, engagement, and work in the course each week.

My observations of Cassidy demonstrate observations that allowed me to note student strengths and needs outside the classroom coursework. I was able to then reflect on student work submissions, and identify additional outlets for students to expand their current skills and enhance their abilities. Just as Cassidy’s character maintained contact beyond her time in the course, students would email to thank me for encouraging their work, and for added assistance as they worked to meet personal goals in their educational or personal life, thereby noting that the caring act was complete.

Alexis’s character represented students who I observed to have the potential to succeed, but were often inhibited by personal conflicts or situations. My observations of student work, contact, and correspondence provided me insight into their lives outside of the classroom, and enhanced my ability to reflect on expressed needs, so that I could further assist them in making progress in the course.

Yet, there were times when my observations were simply not enough to assist the student in meeting an expressed need. While the observations prompted listening, and reflecting, the truth was simply noting a child was struggling, such as the case with Johnny, Jared, and Ana, was not enough to meet the need. My attempts to establish dialogue left me short in being able to act on my observations. A lack of physical presence kept me from providing a hands-on approach to learning I once experienced in the traditional classroom environment. And, my

limited time or availability would sometimes keep me from addressing observed needs in a timely manner.

#### **Theme 4: Tailored Instruction**

The theme of “tailored instruction” demonstrates the teacher’s ability to structure the course, or coursework, in such a way as to address individual student needs. After listening, and reflecting on expressed needs, tailored instruction provided a means of addressing the expressed need of the student. Throughout my narratives, I reveal ways in which I was successful in tailoring instruction to meet the needs of my students, as well as ways in which I was limited or unsuccessful in accomplishing this goal.

For instance, Brittany and Dillon represent a collection of students who demonstrated a need for more personalized, individual attention – students who struggled to find success in the course without weekly support and course assistance. “Nothing is ever good enough for you,” Brittany openly admitted in response to frustration over repeated course revisions and work submission. This familiar phrase, repeated by students and parents alike, often demonstrated a student need for confidence and teacher assistance in the course. While some students found success in our weekly check-ins, thereby demonstrating that my attempt to attend to their need for assistance was successful, there were a few who surrendered to failure and withdrew from the course. Some students, as demonstrated by Bradley’s character, admitted that they were limited in their ability to commit time to the course, or found the nature of the class simply didn’t address their own educational needs. Therefore, they elected to withdraw from the class in search of alternatives for earning the required course credit.

In addition, there were students who expressed a need for additional instructional support in the form of a live lesson. Such students would frequent course live lesson sessions, or meet

with me one-on-one in my virtual classroom for direct instruction and collaboration with peers. While I was unable to alter the assignment, the live lesson structure provided me opportunity to adapt the instruction, and encourage peer to peer collaboration on challenging concepts and ideas.

Other students simply required assistance beyond what I was feasibly able to provide with my limitations in time and space. For instance, there were students who required ELL or IEP accommodations for course success. While I would strive to attend to the individual needs of the learner, and utilize noted accommodations, I was often limited in my ability to provide the level of assistance necessary due to failure to establish regular communication with the student, limited time availability, or my inability to adapt classroom texts and lessons to meet the individual student's level of understanding. For example, this particular course contains a pre-packaged curriculum. I am unable to alter the course assignments, or assessments. For this reason, there were a few times I encouraged students to look to alternate course formats or homeschooling options, or seek a professional tutor to assist them in successfully completing the second semester of my course. It wasn't that I was "giving up" on the student, but rather, I simply could not identify an effective way in which to meet the individual need within the confines of my course structure.

### **Theme 5: Personalized Learning**

The final theme, "personalized learning" represents my ability to attend to the overall education and well-being of my virtual students. I took action to address expressed needs through direct instruction, weekly attempts at communication, and expressed concern for students beyond the scope of their academics. Throughout my narratives, I gave attention to this theme in consideration of student needs and attempted to provide personalized support. For

example, my interactions with one character within the live lesson classroom demonstrated my attention to the individual interests of the student, and use of that knowledge to approach areas of educational need to further the student's understanding of key concepts in the course. In the case of Michael's composite character, I demonstrated attempts to consider the current living or personal conditions that would impact a student's sense of well-being and ability to thrive within the course. Over the course of my tenure as an online instructor, I encountered students living in children's homes, detention centers, and behavioral treatment facilities. It was important to consider the student's overall well-being and personal needs in my communication and attempts at establishing a connection with the student. I also utilized this information in my attempts to assist the student in the course, at times extending our conversation to a more personalized connection and self-disclosure.

Yet, there were times when this consideration was simply not enough to meet the expressed needs of the student. For instance, as is the case with Ana's character, there were demonstrated limitations in my ability to fully recognize or understand and address the individual needs of each child. There were times when students would simply "disappear" from the course – leaving me with nothing more than my own personal interpretation or assumptions regarding their current state of being. As a result, there were times when I elected to withdraw a student from the course in the hopes that the withdrawal would stimulate open communication or connection and elicit student engagement through a course reinstatement.

### **Theme 6: Recognition**

Finally, Nodding's relational care theory (2012) identifies the need for recognition of care. The cared-for must demonstrate that care has been received in order for care to be complete. Some students noted the reception of care and reciprocated care through emails, calls,

or cards. At times, students responded to my efforts at care with a “thank you,” thereby demonstrating they received care, while at the same time reciprocating care by addressing my own need for validation and assurance that I was an effective online teacher. Other times, they responded by returning to work or demonstrating added effort on course assignments. In such cases, it was noted that I effectively met the student’s demonstrated educational or personal need in the course.

Yet, there were times when students and parents demonstrated my failure to meet a personal need. Some students were vocal in their concerns regarding my demonstrated hostility or negative tone in response to their requests for assistance. For example, the voice mail from Mark’s mother was created to illustrate a failed attempt at establishing relational care between teacher and student. While I found that Mark was in need of a higher grade and stronger understanding of the course material, my attempts to encourage that growth were met with resentment and hostility rather than gratitude. In fact, the open hostility of some parents and students demonstrated a lack of personal reflection and thought on my part. My own conclusions on how to best address the child’s need, or perhaps identify the need, were incorrect. Whether this failure to communicate resulted from my own demonstration of stress and frustration in tone of voice, or in my inability to effectively communicate with the student and parent to identify the expressed needs of the student, there were times when I simply did not establish a caring relationship with my virtual students.

### **Relational care beyond the classroom**

What I didn’t expect, was the role relational care would play within my own family and in my connections with colleagues. Although the intention of this study was to examine the teacher to student aspect of relational care, I found that such care extended beyond the confines

of the classroom. For example, Cassandra and I grew in our professional teaming structure, as well as our friendship throughout my first year in the virtual classroom. We spoke daily, took heed of one another's needs (e.g. time for our children, work load, student and parent struggles) and took action to assist one another in managing our time and teaching the course. We worked together to learn more about our students, and meet the students' needs in the class. In reciprocating relational care for one another, we grew in our ability to extend care for our students and our own family.

I found myself wondering if in demonstrating relational care for my colleague, I was in some way extending care to my students. In meeting Cassandra's need for time with her family, I was striving to provide her a reprieve from the stress of the job. In this way, she was able to return to work with greater energy and endurance. In relying on Cassandra to meet my need for time with George and Adalyn, I was able to gain my private time while ensuring my students' needs were addressed in the classroom.

I also took note of the way in which my lead teacher, Allison, demonstrated relational care to me. For instance, when I simply needed someone to listen as I vented about an angry parent call, Allison was there to lend an ear and address the parent for me. She provided me guidance in my first few weeks on the job, and continued to assist me with questions and concerns throughout the entire year. I knew I could rely on her to be available to speak with me and assist me with questions concerning students, parents, and the course.

Finally, my husband provided a much needed touchstone as I navigated my first year as an online teacher. Our close-knit relationship allowed him tremendous insight into my personal needs, and the expectations set by my position as an online teacher. For example, George was fully aware of my personal beliefs regarding classroom instruction. He knew I hoped to find a

way to effectively meet the needs of my students. He was also aware of my need to find a way to balance my work and personal life needs. He used his knowledge to demonstrate relational care as he listened, reflected, and took action to provide an honest response to my situation, while providing me the comfort and encouragement I needed to press forward in my work, education, and familial obligations. Without George's support, I'm not sure how I would have managed my first year in virtual instruction.

### **Care for self**

Finally, upon deep reflection of my experience, I was able to see the significance of care for self with regard to effective online instruction. Whether this was self-care in terms of addressing personal needs, such as the need to find time to eat or take time for myself, or the need to address my personal belief system in what it means to teach to alleviate my own stress and frustrations, it was important that I found ways to validate myself as a teacher.

For instance, there were several times when I would forget to pause, and eat. Hours would pass before I would prepare a meal, and take a break from my workday to enjoy it. There were also days when my decision to continue working would inhibit me from taking time for my own family. As a woman who values my family, and who demonstrates care and love through giving of my time, my decision to work often left me with little time for my husband and daughter. In this way, I was not caring for my own self, as I kept myself from acting as the wife and mother I wanted to be. I became frustrated, and often times resentful, of the fact I made a choice to take time for students over family.

Finally, I began to understand that my need to care for my students stemmed from a need for my own sense of personalized care. In finding success at identifying, and addressing the need of a student, I in turn, found success in addressing my deep-rooted beliefs in what it means to be



a teacher. As a classroom teacher, I was validated in my ability to demonstrate care on a regular basis. However, in transitioning to the online classroom, I soon found that such validation was few and far between. The moments in which students would thank me for my help, or acknowledge the acceptance of my attempts at care – those moments that kept me going as a teacher – were rare. As a result, I often felt out of place, and questioned my role as an online teacher.

### **Academic care in the online classroom**

Finally, I never anticipated the way in which my attempts at relational care would demonstrate such a sharp focus on care for the students' academic needs. Relational care seeks to identify and reflect upon expressed needs. As a traditional classroom teacher, students often expressed needs outside the parameters of academia. They would speak of their personal lives, family, personal dreams, desires, and individual needs. As a traditional classroom teacher, I was in a position to witness such expressions, and strive to address those needs.

In transitioning to a virtual classroom setting, I found that I was more apt to identify needs expressed in the form of academic needs. Aside from a few students who chose to be more vocal in discussing their personal lives and ambitions, or students who engaged in consistent dialogue with me on a regular basis, thereby providing me greater insight into their lives outside of our virtual classroom, I was limited in what I noted to be expressed by the student. I acquired most of my information from student coursework, and in observing student engagement in the course. In this way, I was more apt to identify an academic need, than any other need that might otherwise be expressed.

Research regarding effective online teaching demonstrates that online teachers take on a more managerial role than the traditional classroom instructor (Coppola et al., 2001; DiPietro, et

al.,2008). While I anticipated this would be an important transition within my own role as a teacher, I was surprised to find exactly how much this transition would affect my ability to demonstrate relational care.

### **Discussion**

Over the years, educational researchers have sought to enhance their understanding of relational care (Noddings, 1989, 2012) within the classroom. Research focused on relational care within the brick-and-mortar classroom has demonstrated that caring teachers take time to know their students (Alder & Moulton, 1998; Dillon, 1989; Garza, 2009), respect their students (Bosworth, 1995; Cassidy & Bates, 2005), and motivate their students to reach their academic potential (Caldwell, 1999). Interestingly, I found that, despite the fact my study takes place within the virtual setting, the themes of care within my virtual classroom often align with the findings within the traditional classroom research. For instance, just as I needed to establish dialogue with students, and observe them within the virtual setting, teachers found to be “caring” within the traditional classroom must also take time to establish a strong, but friendly presence (Bosworth, 1995; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Pomeroy, 1999), converse with students (Dillon, 1989), and understand their educational, and personal needs (Alder & Moulton, 1998; Cassidy & Bates, 2005). In addition, just as I must strive to tailor instruction, and address the overall well-being of my virtual students, brick-and-mortar teachers must find ways to make the curriculum relevant (Dillon, 1989), and care for the overall child within the classroom (Garza, 2009). Yet, I found the manner in which I accomplish each task and maintain the communication necessary to succeed, provide an additional challenge to the virtual teacher.

Prior to conducting this autoethnographic narrative inquiry, I identified a single study focused on the role of relational care within the online classroom. While it was not the intention

of this study to replicate, or align with the emergent themes within Velasquez et al.'s (2013) interpretive phenomenological analysis, I can see how my experience as an online teacher parallel the findings of this prior study. As outlined in Table 3 below, themes emerged in my study that paralleled those found in Velasquez et al.'s phenomenological case analysis.

Table 3

*Parallel Themes*

<b><u>My Themes</u></b>	<b><u>Velasquez et al. (2013)</u></b>
Teacher Presence	A Shared Experience
Dialogue	Continuous Dialogue
Observation	Vigilant Observation
Tailored Instruction	Structure of the Learning Environment
Personalized Learning and Recognition	Attending to Needs

My theme of teacher presence aligned with Velasquez et al.'s (2013) discussion of a shared experience, or the connection between teacher and student across time and space. My attempts to establish dialogue, paralleled Velasquez et al.'s discussion of a need for continuous dialogue or conversation between the virtual student and teacher. In addition, my demonstrated attempts at observation further reflected the prior study's focus on a need for vigilant observation on the part of the virtual teacher. Finally, by tailoring classroom instruction, personalizing the learning for the individual student, and identifying recognition of care, my student aligned with Velasquez et al.'s focus on structuring the learning environment, and attending to the individual needs of the virtual learner.

However, while Velasquez et al. (2013) sought to examine the positive, caring relationships between two teachers and select students, my study took a step further in sharing the raw realities of my attempts to establish relational care with a variety of online learners – the successes, as well as the obstacles. I wanted to provide the reader a glimpse into the everyday experiences of a novice, online teacher – a glimpse at the good, the bad, and at times, the ugly. In this way, readers can gain added insight into key steps, and obstacles at establishing and maintaining relational care with students who demonstrate a variety of diverse, individual needs in the online classroom.

### **Reflection**

As a beginning online teacher, I couldn't fathom the thought that a single child would "slip through my fingers" and meet failure in my online classroom. I was determined to do whatever it may take to identify each child's educational need, reflect on that need, and address that need. Yet, as time passed, I found this personal goal vanishing in my rearview mirror as I pressed forward down the road to my doctoral graduation and in search of a way to establish a stronger work/life balance.

I often questioned if, like time, care is simply a limited commodity. In caring for my daughter, I am limited in my time and availability to care for my students. In caring for my own educational aspirations, I am choosing to limit my focus on the student and his needs. At the same time, in caring for one student, I am at that moment limited in my ability to give immediate care to the needs of another student. For example, while taking 30 minutes to address Dillon's needs for assistance, I am inaccessible and therefore unable to attend to what might be an immediate need for Marcus.

I also began to question exactly how Noddings' theory of relational care (2012) translates for me as an online teacher. How do I view relational care as an online educator, in comparison to the way in which I viewed and implemented such care in the traditional school setting? As I reflect, I can see the way in which my personal definition of "relational care" in the online classroom incorporates a strong focus on academic care, the distribution of my time and attention, and the role of reciprocity in addressing my own needs for care and validation.

As an online teacher, I struggled to forge the same form of personal connection and relationship with students that I once understood as "care" with my traditional classroom students. In recalling my conversation with Amelia, my former middle school student, our teacher-student relationship provided her opportunity to express her feelings of frustration and loss after her father moved out of her home. I was able to address her need to enhance her classroom grade, while at the same time provide her a safe environment to share her feelings, and discuss life at home. While some of my online students share stories of their life outside of school, the majority of our discussions and student expressed needs focus on academics. As a result, my role as an online teacher was strongly influenced by student needs for assistance on coursework, and in reaching successful completion of course credit.

On a personal level, I found that I often translated relational care as a need for time and attention. Limitations on time and availability on part of my students, and myself, meant that I often dispersed "care" through the giving of my time. Often, I had to make a choice. For instance, do I call a student back and offer help in the class, or do I ignore a call for assistance, knowing how challenging it would be to connect with this student at a later time, in lieu of spending time with my family? Where should I give of my time? Who should I give attention to at a particular moment in my day? Unlike a traditional classroom setting, in which I am almost

guaranteed time to devote attention to each student each week, as an online teacher, I know how challenging it can be to establish and maintain communication with students and parents. If I'm unable to establish communication, I struggle in being able to listen, reflect, and act on student needs.

Finally, I came to realize the degree to which reciprocity translates to validation on my part as a teacher. For instance, in moments when I began to question my place as an online teacher, or question whether I made a mistake in transitioning to the virtual classroom, a word of gratitude from a student or parent would work to validate my efforts, and thereby further encourage me to press forward. Student recognition that my care was received, and accepted, validated my time, attention, and efforts. It provided me a sense of accomplishment. In the same vein, the times when students or parents seemed to deny my attempts to demonstrate care, or refused to accept my expressed version of care, I became filled with frustration and sense of defeat.

Upon my completion of this dissertation, I found that my thoughts on relational care, the very theory that stimulated my autoethnography, began to shift. As I learned more about myself and the belief systems that followed me into my new role as a virtual teacher, I found that I developed my own understanding of what it means to "care". While I still struggle in placing a distinct definition on the term, in essence, I found a personal belief that relational care comes down to a choice. This choice involves a decision of where one will devote her time and attention. I can't identify an expressed need if I am unwilling to give of my time and attention to identifying the need. I also find that because such time and attention is limited, so is the ability to demonstrate care. In choosing to give time to my students, I am at the same time choosing to take

time away from my family, and visa versa. It seems that time and care are irrevocably intertwined.

The purpose of this autoethnographic narrative inquiry is not to generate generalizable knowledge, but to encourage introspective thought and discussion concerning the role of care in the online classroom as I share the heart of my experience as a virtual teacher. Yet, as I engaged in the reflection and storying of my experience, I found that relational care emerged throughout each story, and in my daily experience as an online teacher. It permeated my personal and professional life, allowing me to take-away the knowledge that such care can allow growth for both students and teachers alike. I noted the role time management plays in the establishment and maintenance of relational care, and the way in which experience, communication, and reflection can promote or hinder such care in the virtual classroom.

Is it possible to generate relational care with virtual students? I believe so. However, I believe such care will inevitably appear different within the virtual platform, as we might anticipate within the traditional classroom setting. While our encounters with students in a face-to-face environment can stimulate discussions and connections that focus on more personalized needs, virtual encounters often focus heavily on needs of the academic nature. I also believe there are limitations put in place by both the educational organization, individual student, as well as the individual teacher – limitations that should be considered and placed in perspective if we hope to encourage relational care within the online classroom. Finally, it's essential we continue to examine the role of “relational care” in the online classroom, and the way in which the individual teacher defines and enacts such care in the virtual setting.

## Implications for Future Research

Is it possible to demonstrate relational care within the virtual classroom? I'd have to say, "Yes". However, there are a variety of variables and circumstances to consider in identifying effective ways to enact such care with online learners (e.g. time constraints, communication outlets, student enrollment numbers, multi-media tools, student background and culture). As the world of education continues to veer towards the online platform, it's important to consider the needs of our secondary students as we work to address their individual needs from a distance. And, while we understand the benefits of relational care within the confines of the brick-and-mortar classroom (Alder, 2002; Alder & Moulton, 1998; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Dillon, 1989; Garza, 2009; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012), we still lack research focused on whether relational care truly encourages or assists online learners in the same way.

As research in the role of relational care continues within the virtual learning platform, it's important we gain a deeper understanding of the role of relational care ethics within the virtual setting – its effect on student learning, development, performance, and overall sense of well-being. In addition, we should concern ourselves with the way in which care ethics can further the moral development of adolescent learners who are separated by time and space – learners who lack the opportunity for the "teachable moments" that often escape us as online educators.

This particular study focuses on my personal experience with relational care in the virtual classroom. I think we should take relational care research a step further, and examine the role of relational care from the student's point of view. How do virtual students view the "caring" virtual teacher? And, how do students feel a caring teacher can influence their work, or ability to



reach success in the virtual class setting? Does a caring virtual teacher carry the same influence and motivation as noted by research in the traditional classroom?

Further, while my part-time virtual course was one of an asynchronous nature, in which the students and I often interacted outside the moment in which they were actively engaged in the course, it's important that research continues to examine the role of synchronous and asynchronous instruction in the establishment and furthering of relational care amongst students and teachers. As we progress in our understanding of relational care and its place in the virtual school setting, we should continue to grow in our understanding of the value and place of care for our growing base of online learners.

## REFERENCES

- Alder, N.I. (2002). Interpretations in the meaning of care. *Urban Education*, 37(2), 241-266.
- Alder, N. I., & Moulton, M. (1998). Interpretations of the meaning of care: Creating caring relationships in a middle school classroom. *Research in Middle Level Education Quarterly*, 21(3), 15-32.
- Anderson, J. F. (1979). Teacher immediacy as a predictor of teaching effectiveness. In D. Nimmo (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 3* (pp. 543-559). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Arbaugh, J.B. (2001). How instructor immediacy behaviors affect student satisfaction and learning in Web-based courses. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 64, 42-54.
- Atkinson, P. (1997). Narrative turn or blind alley? *Qualitative Health Research*, 7, 325-344.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: W.H. Freeman and Company.
- Beattie, M. (1995). *Constructing professional knowledge in teaching: A narrative of change and development*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Beck, L.G. (1994). *Reclaiming educational administration as a caring profession*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Berg, B.L. & Lune, H. *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
- Bochner, A. (1997). It's about time: Narrative and the divided self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(4), 418-38.
- Bochner, A. (2005). Storytelling and the Self in Everyday Life: Narrative Inquiry on the Cutting Edge. *Asia Communication and Media Studies*, pp.183-192.
- Bochner, A. (2012). On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry*, 22 (1), 155-64

- Bosworth, K. (1995). Caring for others and being cared for. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76, 686-693.
- Boys, K.S. (2000). *Lesson learned from low achieving students: How to improve the quality of life in school*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Miami University, FL.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Act of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Caldwell, P. (1999). *Windows of caring: High school students' constructions of a 'caring' teacher*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation.
- Cassidy, W. & Bates, A. (2005). "Drop-Outs" and "Push-Outs": Finding hope at a school that actualizes the ethic of care. *American Journal of Education*, 112, 66-102.
- Cavanaugh, C., Gillan, K.J., Kromrey, J., Hess, M., & Blomeyer, R. (2004). *The effects of distance education on K-12 student outcomes: A meta-analysis*. Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates.
- Clandinin, D.J, & Connelly, F.M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research..* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Education Series.
- Clough, P. (2002). *Narratives and fictions in educational research*. New York: Open University Press.
- Coppola, N.W., Hiltz, S.R., & Rotter, N. (2001). Becoming a virtual professor: pedagogical roles and ALN. In *Proceedings of the 34<sup>th</sup> Hawaii International Conference on Systems Sciences*: IEEE Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. & Bransford, J. (Eds.) (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- DiPietro, M., Ferdig, R.E., Black, E.W., & Preston, M. (2008). Best practices in teaching K-12 online: Lessons learned from Michigan Virtual School teachers. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 7(1), 10-38.
- Dillon, D.R. (1989). Showing them that I want them to learn and that I care about who they are: A microethnography of the social organization of a secondary low-track English reading classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26, 227-259.

- Eccles, J.S. (1999). The development of children ages six to fourteen. *The Future of Children*, 9(2), 30-44.
- Eccles, J.S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C.M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Mac Iver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist*, 48, 90-101.
- Eccles, J.S., Wigfield, A. & Schiefele, U. (1998). Motivation. In N. Eisenberg (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol.3. Social, emotional, and personality development*. (5<sup>th</sup> Ed., pp. 1017-1095). New York: Wiley.
- Edmonds, J.P. (1992). "We work harder for teachers who care": Teachers' caring behaviors as perceived by gifted and challenged students and their teachers. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University Teachers College, New York.
- Ellis, C. (1995). *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Ellis, C. (1999). Heartful autoethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(5), 669-683.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T.E., & Bochner, A.P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), Art. 10.
- Ellis, C. & Bochner, A. (1992). Telling and performing personal stories: The constraints of choice in abortion. In C. Ellis & M. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 79-101.
- Evergreen Education Group, (2012). *Keeping pace with K-12 online and blended learning: An annual review of policy and practice*. Retrieved from iNACOL website: <http://kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/KeepingPace2012.pdf>
- Florida Legislature, (2013). *Online Sunshine*. Retrieved from: <http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Welcome/index.cfm?CFID=311919749&CFTOKEN=99112045>

- Frank, A.W. (2000). The standpoint of storyteller. *Qualitative Health Research, 10*, 354-65.
- Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education, 2*(2-3), 87-105.
- Garza, R. (2009). Latino and white high school students' perceptions of caring behaviors: Are we culturally responsive to our students? *Urban Education, 44*(3), 297-321.
- Gilbert, K.R. (2002). Taking a narrative approach to grief research: Finding meaning in stories. *Death Studies, 26*(3), 223-239.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goodenow, C. (1993). Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 13*, 21-43.
- Hartley, K., & Bendixen, L. (2001). Educational research in the Internet age: Examining the role of individual characteristics. *Educational Researcher, 30*(9), 22-26.
- Hatch, J.A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in educational settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hawkins, A., Graham, C.R., & Barbour, M.K. (2012). "Everybody is their own island": Teacher disconnection in a virtual school. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 13*(2), 123-144.
- Hawkins, A., Graham, C., Sudweeks, R., & Barbour, M.K. (2013). Course completion rates, and student perceptions of the quality and frequency of interaction in a virtual high school. *Distance Education 34*(1), 64-83.
- Hayano, D.M. (1979). Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects. *Human Organization, 38*, 99-104.
- Hechinger, F.M. (1993). Schools for teenagers: A historic dilemma. *Teachers College Record, 94*(3), 522-539.

- Hughes, S., Pennington, J.L., & Makris, S. (2012). Translating autoethnography across the AERA standards: Toward understanding autoethnographic scholarship as empirical research. *Educational Researcher*, 41, 209-219.
- Ickes, W. (1997). *Empathetic Accuracy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Johnson, C.S., & Thomas, A.T. (2009). Caring as classroom practice. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 22(1), 8-11.
- Kohn, A. (1991). Caring kids: The role of the schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 72(7), 496-506.
- Lai, K. & Pratt, K. (2009). Technological constraints and implementation barriers of using videoconferencing for virtual teaching in New Zealand secondary schools. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 17(4), 505-522.
- Leavy, P. (2009). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*, New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Lincoln, Y.S., Lynham, S.A., & Guba, E. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 97-128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mayeroff, M. (1971). *On caring*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent messages*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Mulcahy, D. M., Dibbon, D., & Norberg, C. (2008). *An investigation into the nature of education in a rural and remote region of Newfoundland and Labrador: The Straits*. St. John's NL: The Harris Centre, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Murphy, E., & Rodriguez-Manzanares, M. (2008). Contradictions between the virtual and physical high school classroom: A third-generation activity theory perspective. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39(6), 1061-1072.
- Murphy, E., & Rodriguez-Manzanares, M.A. (2009). Teachers' perspectives on motivation in high school distance education. *Journal of Distance Education*, 23(3), 1-24.
- Myers, S.A., Zhong, M., & Guan, S. (1998). Instructor immediacy in the Chinese college classroom. *Communication Studies*, 49, 240-253.
- National Middle School Association (1982). *This we believe*. Columbus, OH: Author.

- Neuman, M. (1996). Collecting ourselves at the end of the century. In C. Ellis & A. Bochner (Eds.), *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*, London: Alta Mira Press.
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (1988). An ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements. *American Journal of Education*, 96(2), 215-231.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2008). Caring and moral education. In L. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (pp. 161-174). New York: Routledge.
- Noddings, N. (2012). The language of care ethics. *Knowledge Quest*, 40(4), 53-56.
- Ottenberg, S. (1990). Thirty years of fieldnotes: Changing relationships to the text. In R. Sanjek (Ed.), *Fieldnotes* (pp. 139-160). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Paul, J.L. (2005) (Ed.). *Introduction to the philosophies of research and criticism in education and the social sciences*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Petrides, L.A. (2002). Web-based technologies for distributed (or distance) learning: Creating learning-centered educational experiences in the higher education classroom. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 29(1), 69-77.
- Picciano, A.G. (2002). Beyond student perceptions: Issues of interaction, presence, and performance in an online course. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 6, 21-40.
- Pomeroy, E. (1999). The teacher-student relationship in secondary school: Insights from excluded students. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20, 465-482.
- Repetto, J., Cavanaugh, G., Wayer, N., & Liu, F. (2010). Virtual high schools: Improving outcomes for students with disabilities. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 11(2), 91-104.
- Richardson, J. & Swan, K. (2003). An examination of social presence in online learning: Students' perceived learning and satisfaction. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 7(1), 68-88.

- Rivera-McCutchen, R.L. (2012). Caring in a small urban high school: A complicated success. *Urban Education, 47*(3), 653-680.
- Roblyer, M.D., Davis, L., Mills, S.C., Marshall, J., & Pape, L. (2008). Toward practical procedures for predicting and promoting success in virtual school students. *American Journal of Distance Education, 22*(2), 90-109.
- Ryan, P.L. & Powelson, C.L. (1991). Autonomy and relatedness as fundamental to motivation and education. *Journal of Experimental Education, 60*(1), 49-66.
- Sandelowski, M. (1991). Telling stories: Narrative approaches in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 23*(3), 161-166.
- Sanjek, R. (1990). A vocabulary for fieldnotes. In R. Sanjek (Ed.), *Fieldnotes* (pp. 92-121). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Song, J.A., Singleton, E.S., Hill, J.R., & Kohn, M.H. (2004). Improving online learning: Student perceptions of useful and challenging characteristics. *The Internet and Higher Education, 7*, 59-70.
- Spry, T., (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry, 7*(6), 706-732.
- Stueber K. (2006). *Rediscovering empathy: Agency, folk psychology, and the human Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Swan, K. (2001). Virtual interaction: Design factors affecting student satisfaction and perceived learning in asynchronous online courses. *Distance Education, 22*(2), 306-31.
- Swan, K. & Shea, P. (2005). The development of virtual learning communities. In S. R. Hiltz & R. Goldman, *Asynchronous Learning Networks: The Research Frontier*. New York: Hampton Press, 239-260.
- Tronto, J.(1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. New York: Routledge.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2009). Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies. Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development.



- Velasquez, A., Graham, C.R., & Osguthorpe, R. (2013). Caring in a technology-mediated online high school context. *Distance Education*, 34(1), 97-118.
- Volery, T. (2001). Online education: An exploratory study into success factors. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 24(1), 77-92.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*7(1), 38-53.
- Weiner, M. & Mehrbian, A. (1968). *Language within language: Immediacy, a channel in verbal communication*. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Wiles, J., & Bondi, J. (1993). *The essential middle school*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Wilson, J.H. (2006). Predicting student attitudes and grades from perceptions of instructors' attitudes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33, 91-95.
- Yang, M. M. C. (1945). *A Chinese village*. New York: Columbia University Press.

## APPENDIX A – CHARACTER LIST

Character Name	Age Range	Narrative	Key Notes
Cassidy	15 to 17	Day 1	Gifted writer
Alexis	13 to 14	Day 1	Has potential in course, but parents are going through a divorce and mother has cancer – not motivated to work
Jose	17 to 18	Day 1	In a hurry to complete the course, or public school guidance counselor will withdraw him
Bradley	16 to 19	Day 1	Wants to earn GED instead of completing final 6 assignments in course – parents are divorcing
Marcus	17 to 18	Day 1	Continues to fail attempts at writing his narrative – Won't return calls for tutoring assistance – Returns my voice mail as I am picking up Adalyn from daycare
Brittany	13 to 16	Day 1	Struggling with writing a thesis statement – Frustrated with class and wants to quit – Set up with a weekly tutoring call
Johnny	15 to 16	Day 1	Needs assistance in editing written work
Michael	17 to 18	Day 1	Student in detention facility – Needs to complete course so he can return home – Questioning if he should earn his GED or continue towards graduation
Susan	13 to 16	1 Year Later	Hospital/Homebound – Receiving cancer treatment
Jared	16 to 19	1 Year Later	Did not return teacher contact – Dropped from the course – Parent call for reinstatement
Jason	12 to 20	1 Year Later	Parent called for a monthly update
Bridget	12 to 16	1 Year Later	Needed assistance with a unit in the class – Actress – Making great progress
Dillon	13 to 15	1 Year Later	Struggling with each lesson – Requires regular teacher assistance to complete coursework – Low reading level
Mark	13 to 17	1 Year Later	Parent upset with lack of progress and teacher response – Angry voicemail

Justine	16 to 18	1 Year Later	Student would not keep call appointments or complete required phone quiz – Suspended pending completed quiz
Ana	15 to 16	1 Year Later	Hospital/Homebound – Cancer treatment – Not returning teacher attempts at contact – Medical withdrawal from class
Ms. Marshall	Adult	Day 1	Bradley's mother – Called to request withdrawl for student – Earning GED
Mr. Smith	Adult	1 Year Later	Dillon's father – Concerned about progress – Discussed plan of action for second semester of the class
Mrs. Francis	Adult	1 Year Later	Mark's mother – Called to complain about student withdrawal from the class

## APPENDIX B – LIST OF WEEKLY RESPONSIBILITIES

As a part-time virtual teacher, wife, mother, and doctoral candidate, I had specific responsibilities each week...

### Teaching:

- Call students who had not worked in the past seven days
- Call parents and students for a required monthly contact and update
- Call students who were 80% or more complete in the segment to encourage them to finish the semester
- Call new students for a welcome call to the course
- Call students working in the two week grace period for a check-in
- Return all contact from students and parents within 24 hours of the attempted contact
- Tutor struggling students in their coursework
- Complete phone quiz calls for students who approached the phone quiz assignment
- Attend faculty meetings (team meetings, department meetings, PLC meetings, training sessions)
- Teach live lessons (4 per month – each lasting an hour with thirty minutes for preparation and time after the session to reflect with my co-teacher)
- Grade student submitted coursework within 48 hours of the assignment submission
- Send out weekly progress report emails to students and parents
- Email students who have not worked within seven days
- Email students who are 80% or more complete in the segment
- Email students working within their first two weeks in the class
- Email new students regarding course expectations and the need to complete a welcome call within seven to ten days of course placement
- Withdraw students who have not worked in the past 21 days, if unable to move them to submit coursework
- Issue final grades for any student who successfully completed the course and completed the final exam
- Complete exam remediation sessions for any student who has not passed the final exam after a first attempt

### Personal:

- Various familial and personal obligations (varied week to week)
- Drop daughter off at pre-school by 9a.m. each morning, and pick her up no later than 5 p.m.
- Spend quality time with my husband and daughter each evening
- Get my daughter up and ready for school every morning

Doctoral Program:

- Worked as Associate Editor for Florida English Journal during first year as virtual teacher
- Work on completing my dissertation proposal and having it approved by committee
- Continue writing, publishing, and presenting research at state and national level

## APPENDIX C – IRB EXEMPTION

### Activity Details (Study that has never been approved is Closed)

---

<b>Author:</b>	Various Menzel (Research Integrity & Compliance)
<b>Logged For (Study):</b>	Stories of Care in the Virtual Classroom: An Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry
<b>Activity Date:</b>	8/7/2014 9:11 AM

---

[Activity Form](#) [Property Changes](#) [Documents](#) [Notifications](#)

#### Close Study - Never Approved Activity

- This activity will close the IRB Study and change the state to **Closed - Never Approved**.
- Any comments and/or documents entered below will show in the History Log.

#### Comments:

The Chair has reviewed and determined: "Activities described in the application (describing personal experiences) are not designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge. The activities do not constitute research per USF IRB criteria; USF IRB approval and oversight are not required."

#### Add Documents:

Name	Description
There are no items to display	