



Creating a Culture of Care in Adult Education: What It Is and Why It Is Critical

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"Caring is the very bedrock of all successful education."
(Noddings, 1992, p, 27)

HANDOUT 02

When you reflect on your own educational experiences, you likely remember how particular teachers made you feel, rather than what they actually taught you. We fondly remember caring teachers who affirmed our individuality and facilitated our success. On the other hand, we may have struggled to achieve our best in classes where the focus seemed more on covering curriculum than investing in our personal development. Research suggests that caring teachers support both students' academic growth (Bulach, Malone, & Castlemean, 1995; Rauner, 2000; Watson & Ecken, 2003) and social development (Noddings, 1988; Watson & Ecken, 2003).



What is a Culture of Care?

In education, a “culture of care” is an environment in which school administrators and teachers are concerned with students’ holistic well-being (e.g., academic, emotional, and social development) and, as a result, are committed to developing caring relationships with students (Noddings, 1992, 2002). According to Noddings (1992, 2002), there are two foundational elements to caring: 1) understanding the other person’s reality, and 2) demonstrating caring action on the other’s behalf. For educators to establish a caring relationship with their students, they must take the time to understand the individual life circumstances of their students and exhibit caring behaviours. In fact, educators’ caring actions must be interpreted and received positively by students to be viewed as authentic, otherwise they fall short of meeting students’ actual needs (Noddings 1984, 1992).

Why Is a Culture of Care Critical in Adult Education?

While a culture of care is important for all students, it may be particularly important in facilitating resilience for at-risk-students who have had negative schooling experiences and who lack support networks (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Hansen, 2001; Rauner, 2000). There is a restorative aspect to a culture of care that offers students the opportunity of a more positive educational experience with staff committed to ensuring their success on multiple levels. In the case of

adult education (AE), an environmental scan of adult learners in Eastern Ontario (across eight school boards) revealed that many adult learners, particularly Early School Leavers, had negative experiences of high school, including being bullied, having undiagnosed learning disabilities, experiencing mental health challenges (e.g., anxiety), and being kicked out of school (Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017). One AE staff referred to these negative high school experiences as “educational baggage” and asserted that “sustaining the human touch and care factor” were required in the delivery of adult education to help students overcome their educational baggage and be successful learners (Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017).

How Can We Cultivate a Culture of Care in Adult Education?

There are four practices for cultivating a culture of care in an educational setting: 1) model caring; 2) engage in meaningful dialogue with students; 3) confirm and applaud caring; and 4) provide opportunities to practice care (Noddings, 1992, 1995, 2002). In the environmental scan of adult education in the Eastern Ontario region (mentioned earlier), a culture of care was documented across the region (Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017). Examples of each of the four practices and ideas about future directions are presented in relation to adult learners to illustrate how a culture of care can be cultivated in the context of AE.

1) Model Caring

Adult learners in the Eastern Ontario region reported the presence of caring adults in their adult education programs and expressed appreciation for the care they received. One student described the willingness of teachers to help: *“They will help you and it’s not like you are bothering them or wasting their time. They actually want to help you and they want to teach you...to help you go where you want to go in life.”* Adult education staff demonstrated caring through the following behaviours:

- Affirming adult learners to build their self-esteem and self-confidence
- Providing one-on-one support for students who needed it
- Having regular monthly check-in meetings to review adult learners’ goals and their progress towards those goals
- Giving follow-up calls when students did not complete their lessons in a timely fashion
- Differentiating the classroom learning space to meet individual learning styles
- Providing for the basic needs of adult learners – food, transportation, and a warm, safe, and caring environment
- Sharing meals with the AE community of learners to help build relationships

2) Engage in Meaningful Dialogue with Students

Adult education staff interviewed in the Eastern region environmental scan of AE recognized their role as twofold: to create pathways for adults and to support them on a personal level. To do this, AE staff, particularly guidance counsellors, engaged in meaningful conversations with adult learners about their career goals and any personal issues. For example, one student indicated that his original plan of just getting his GED changed for the better when he met with a guidance counsellor: *“He kind of pointed out to me that it would be just as easy for me to get my full Grade 12...I didn’t know that mature credits were possible. I didn’t know that Prior Learning Assessment existed.”* Another student described

receiving ongoing personal support from her guidance counsellor: *“I still go to guidance sometimes when I don’t know [something]...if I get a bad grade, I fail a course, I go there. I talk to him and that motivates me. Then I continue with the next semester.”* Adult learners reported appreciating the support of their guidance counsellors.

3) Confirm and Applaud Caring

In adult education programs (with physical locations) in the Eastern region, many students reported feeling connected to and supported by their teachers and peers. For example, one student reported *“do[ing] big discussions and get[ting] viewpoints from other students and teachers. The other students here they want to be here also, so we are always trying to help each other...you have got a big support system coming into this school.”* Another student acknowledged how the teacher facilitated a team approach in the classroom: *“All the students, we work together here. No-one is down-played and the teacher helps us all with that.”* For good reason, AE staff in such programs took pride in the development of caring communities. Given that many adult education programs are moving towards offering eLearning as a flexible mode of delivery, it will be important for AE staff to consider how they can facilitate caring online communities.

4) Provide Opportunities to Practice Care

In addition to being given classroom opportunities to practice care for others, AE staff and students participated in formal and informal school gatherings. For example, one adult education program had clubs (e.g., Newcomers club, Technology club) in which members could share their talents and learn from the talents of others. In another adult education program, AE staff and students took part in shared meals with their learning community. Given the critical role of caring in society, it may be beneficial for AE programs to incorporate more opportunities to practice care both inside and outside the classroom.

In summary, developing a culture of care in adult education programs is critical because it promotes the holistic well-being of adult learners and provides a positive educational experience. Adult education staff cultivate a culture of care by: 1) modelling caring, 2) engaging in meaningful dialogue with their students, 3) confirming and applauding the caring of others, and 4) providing opportunities for both staff and students to practice care.

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