

Reflections on Teaching over a Decade in a Christian Institution of Higher Education

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Abstract

After many years in public education followed by 10 years of preparing teachers in a faith-based institution, this essay shares insights into what it means to cultivate and maintain a Christian ethic of care, toward self and others. This story of God's faithfulness in my life is reflected outward through multiple lenses of care.

Ten years ago, I was a curriculum coordinator in a local school district in South Carolina; now I am a dean in a School of Education. It has been an exciting and unexpected journey. I started teaching as an adjunct instructor with my university twelve years ago. When I retired after 37 years teaching in k-12 public education, I thought that I would just volunteer with church and community organizations and go to lunch with my friends—just enjoy life. I was so wrong. During the summer of my retirement, I received a call from my university to talk about a fulltime position in the School of Education. This offer led me to teach for the next 10 years helping to shape hundreds of educators to demonstrate a Christian ethic of care toward self, learners, colleagues, and community. After so many years in public education, it is refreshing to be able to pray with students in and out of class in the private Christian college setting, and to teach faith-based dispositions. My university emphasizes a Christian ethic of care as our main approach to developing ethical, Christian educators. Scripturally, the Christian ethic of care is based on the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, where an injured traveler was passed over by a priest and a Levite. The Good Samaritan, who was despised by ordinary Jews, demonstrated an ethic of care toward a wounded traveler.

When God spoke to me on that day 10 years ago, I chose to listen and began to teach future teachers. The quote, "Choose a work that you love, and you won't have to work another day" (Confucius), describes my journey for the past decade in the School of Education.

I love working with these future teachers. I began another phase in my life because I believed that God called me to prepare these young men and women for a rewarding and fulfilling career.

Ethic of Care Towards Self

The Ethic of care toward self is a concept that is often difficult to relate to students who are training to become teachers. I have always been convinced that educators should have a biblical approach to learning because teaching is a calling and a mission. When I came out of retirement to teach in Christian higher education, it was with the thought that I could help future teachers to be able to better foster this ethic of care toward themselves during their teaching career. An ethic of care toward self is often difficult for our student to embrace. But this tenant takes another step and extols the future teachers to not only have a passion for learning, but to treat the body as a temple—"do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own. You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies" (Corinthians 6:19-20 New International Version).

I found that our education students take a full course load, work part-time or even full-time, complete a 30-hour practicum each semester and do not take or have the time to practice an ethic of care toward themselves. Currently, the School of Education has a young man enrolled who is a biology education student teacher. He is working a full-time job while trying to raise his young son as a single parent. He barely has time to care for his young son; there is just not enough time for him to care for his own needs. He will be an outstanding Biology teacher, but my colleagues and I have continually encouraged him to take time for physical and spiritual renewal. His mentor and his clinical supervisors admonish him, "rest when you are weary. Refresh and renew yourself, your body, your mind, and your spirit. Then get back to work" (Ralph Marston).

The young man is now at the midpoint in his student teaching and is doing much better in his studies and his personal care. His faculty supervisor's mentoring, nourishing and admonishing have to continue so he can complete the requirements successfully.

Ethic of Care Toward Learners

When I began to teach at the university, I taught both graduate and undergraduate students. When I began teaching full-time, I worked more with pre-service teachers, and I was encouraged to see the growth in the pre-service students as they went into the public schools. It is interesting to note the stories that our students relate when they become so attached to the k-12 students that attend their schools. The clinical students voluntarily work after school to tutor, attend school events and even sponsor some of the events. One of our Early Childhood majors was in tears when her little kindergartener gave her a torn paper heart the day she came to tell the class "good-bye" (after completing her practicum hours) and brought the entire class cupcakes. The young kindergartener said that his heart hurt because she was leaving. Another clinical student met with all his 5th grade students' parents so he could tell them how great their children were. A physical education major volunteered to assist in coaching the middle school softball team after completing his practicum. One music major freely directed the 4th grade Christmas program where all the moms cried, and all the dads beamed as they subtly brushed away tears. These actions mirror the things my university has been teaching for the past dozen years. The faculty cannot teach education majors how to care, but they can and do model the caring with the university students. I am pleased to see the caring actions that are exhibited by our education graduates beyond any course or program requirements. The university faculty model this same ethic of care for their college level learners.

Ethic of Care Toward Colleagues

Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22: 36-40 New International Version). Coming from a public k-12 environment, the concept of an ethic of care toward colleagues as well as toward learners was often a venture into a different culture. Many times, school faculty are siloed

in their own grade level or subject areas, so it takes a conscious effort to move out of one's comfort zone.

At my university, this culture of care toward colleagues extends beyond the boundaries of the School of Education to the greater university. I was heartened to note the overwhelming support offered to a colleague at the university with terminal cancer—the ethic of care toward colleagues took the form of monies to help with meals and transportation to the hospital in Atlanta for her chemotherapy. Additionally, students and faculty volunteered to help clean her house and provide child-care for her children. Faculty, staff, and students lifted up prayers and celebrated a service of healing at the university that was widely attended. I was and am still convinced that the service of healing helped extend her life for another year because of God's intervention. Even in the midst of her illness, she still came to work teaching and ministering to her students. The students saw the entire university faculty rally around her. They also saw her care and love for each one of her students in the midst of her own illness.

I am so blessed to work where our provost prayed the following prayer of love and care for all the faculty and staff during the last university faculty meeting.

I'd like to use Paul's words from Philippians 1, which I've revised somewhat, and read them to you. This is my letter to you, the community of Southern Wesleyan University:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of our partnership in the education and godly transformation of our students and our colleagues and ourselves as well, from that very first day until now. I remember that first day I met you, almost two years ago during my interview, and my joy at God calling me to be part of this community. I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am shackled to my office chair creating procedures and policies for SACSCOC or defending and confirming your needs before the President's Cabinet, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. I am indeed thankful for each one of you and am thankful for your unique calling to this

place for God’s glory. We have much to do as we move forward for our many innovations and our re-affirmation—but I want you to know that the work we do is to God’s glory and that He will strengthen each of us in our community to do what we are called to do to move forward and to care for one another. And throughout it all—let us safeguard love.

Ethic of Care Toward Community

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15)

Just as it takes all parts working together to ensure that the body grows, the School of Education has to work with all parts to ensure that the future teachers and the candidates grow and develop in love. One of the tenets of our mission is an ethic of care toward community which stems directly from the institution’s mission to be a generous organization and share our resources with the local and the global community. The School of Education had more than 60 education students who volunteered for the regional Special Olympics which was and still is hosted at our institution. It was inspirational to see the commitment and dedication

of our students and faculty as they worked with the middle school participants in the Special Olympics. I saw a burly male early childhood and family studies major as he walked across campus with three special needs students clinging to him. I rejoiced as we heard education students say things like, “This was one of the best experiences of my life” and “I am where God wants me to be” and “I never knew how much participation in this event would mean to me.”

“There should be no division in the body, but...its parts should have equal concern for each other” (I Corinthians 12:25 New International Version). Annually, our students participate in a Day of Service project where they work around the campus or as many do, go out into the local community and work in local food-banks and homeless shelters.

The students participate in the Special Olympics and the Day of Service for the same reason they spend their fall, spring, and summer breaks going on mission trips. The students genuinely want to serve a need for the global as well as the local community. They feel a calling to work in the communities and to provide service to folks in need. This stems from a sincere need for spiritual fulfillment in their lives and not simply because classes are canceled on these special days.



School of Education students posing before the Special Olympics.

Implications

I have been blessed for the past 10 years to work at an organization that has the social and educational framework that fosters this Christian ethic of care. This type of culture is a by-product of purposeful individuals who formed and nurtured students in a caring environment. Our students constantly hear about a Christian ethic of care in F2F and online classrooms. We have chapels, special events, and programs that constantly confirm the university and the School of Education's commitment to this culture of caring. However, the real litmus test is the fact that our faculty and students live out this ethic. During the past decade, I have had the honor of working with faculty and staff who not only foster, but champion a spirit of caring for our teacher candidates. I have also had the pleasure of working with teacher candidates who demonstrate this same ethic. The pre-clinical and Clinical students are often saddened to leave the k-12 students because they have formed relationships and attachments. These same graduates commit to teach in the mission fields, low-performing schools, and Title I school to make an impact on the young learners and the community.

In the words of Esther, "Perhaps this is the moment for which I (sic) have been created" (Esther 4:14). I know these moments were the reason I was created during the past 10 years as I retired from one career in public education and stepped into another career in private higher education. I really did not change careers, I simply changed the focus of my teaching career. God has always called me to teach, whether it has been in a Title I inner-city school or at a private Christian university.

References

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