

Article

# Beyond Academic Grades: Reflections on My Care for University Students' Holistic Development in Singapore

**Cherise Shi Ling Teo**

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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## Abstract

This reflective paper draws on my experience in caring for students as a lecturer in the English Language (EL) department of the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. My care considerations are broadly categorized into the three areas of positioning of the teacher in relation to students, negotiation of needs, and pedagogical design for students' well-being. Being a former primary school teacher, I see myself as both teacher and mentor when conducting teacher-training modules in NIE. As the positioning of self in relation to students (Barrow, 2015; Noddings, 1984) informs both my interactions with them and my lesson plans, I see this positioning as a starting point in care considerations for teaching. In negotiation of needs, I discuss open communication channels that allow the deepening of understanding of different needs and expectations (Baice et al., 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2022). The third area of care focuses on "care-full" planning of curriculum structures that consider students' needs and limitations (Anderson et al., 2020, p.11; Conceição & Howles, 2020). I also consider the state of Singapore's highly competitive education landscape in order to highlight the specific needs of local university students, such as the need for teachers to create safe learning spaces that encourages cooperation rather than competition for holistic development (Noddings, 2012). Other than anecdotes from my EL classes in NIE, I refer to the qualitative student feedback that I received between 2019 and 2022 in my reflections on the impact of my caring methods.

## Keywords

Care ethics, pedagogy, higher education, holistic education, teacher training

## 1 Understanding Care in Higher Education

As I reflected on care in higher education while preparing for this paper, I revisited the "Teaching Philosophy" document that I wrote in 2018 when I was job hunting. On the first page, I wrote:

*Foundational to my teaching philosophy is knowing the students and building relationships with them. The best planned lesson can be ineffective if I neither know them nor connect with them because different classes have different dynamics. Through meaningful interactions with*

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*the students, I will learn more about them, and this knowledge will enable me to better plan my lessons in order to cater to their learning needs and challenge them intellectually.*

While the word “care” is not used in the paragraph above, there is an emphasis on the importance of relationships which is the foundation of care ethics (Noddings, 2012). Care has always been a crucial guiding principle in my teaching even though at that time I was unaware of this field of study developed by care ethicists like Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984, 2012).

The development of my beliefs as an educator was greatly influenced by C. S. Lewis who explored the question of to what end our care is directed in his book, *The Four Loves*, which was first published in 1960. C. S. Lewis (2012 [1960]) in his reflection on the different types of love and his role as a university teacher emphasized that good teachers “must always be working towards the moment at which our pupils are fit to become our critics and rivals” (p. 63). In other words, the teacher should not care in such a way that the student is in a permanent position of dependence. Our care or in Lewis’ term, our “Gift-love”, should guide them towards becoming better versions of their independent selves and not copies of us. According to Lewis (2012),

*But the proper aim of giving is to put the recipient in a state where he no longer needs our gift. We feed children in order that they may soon be able to feed themselves; we teach them in order that they may soon not need our teaching. Thus a heavy task is laid upon this Gift-love. It must work towards its own abdication. We must aim at making ourselves superfluous. The hour when we can say ‘They need me no longer’ should be our reward. (p. 62)*

The observation that the goal of a caring teacher is to become unneeded is an ideal that presents a constant challenge to one’s ego with its desire to be needed and useful. However, I believe that this understanding of the purpose of care facilitates the practice of the three factors of caring developed by Noddings (1984) – engrossment (teachers’ attentiveness to students’ needs/well-being), motivational displacement (teachers’ motivation to attend to the needs of students), and reciprocity (students’ recognition and response to teachers’ care). In reducing one’s preoccupation with self-interests, the teacher has greater capacity and motivation to attend to students’ needs, which include needs related to their learning (e.g., understanding of concepts and conduciveness of learning environment), self-esteem (e.g., being recognized as individuals and affirmed), and external responsibilities (e.g., family obligations).

Other than Lewis’ book, my beliefs as a teacher were also influenced by my reflection of school experiences as both student and teacher in Singapore. After graduating from the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore’s national teacher education institute and an autonomous institute of Nanyang Technological University, I taught in a primary school for five years. After that, I pursued a full-time PhD program in English Language studies and was eventually hired by NIE as a lecturer. My experience in different academic institutions as both a student and a teacher for most of my life, together with Lewis’ ideas, have contributed to my belief that teaching is inseparable from caring, regardless of students’ age groups.

In the following sections, I first provide an outline of the culture of Singapore’s education system as my reflections are based solely on my experiences in Singapore. As noted by Noddings (2012) and Barrow (2015) in their discussions on caring practices, students from different cultural backgrounds have different needs. Therefore, it is important to consider that students are influenced by society’s predominant ideologies, and they bring these ideologies with them to the class. Subsequently, I discuss how I developed care in my teaching practice in NIE in terms of the positionality of the teacher, negotiation of needs, and pedagogical design. I end with recommendations for fellow educators in higher education.

## 2 Singapore’s Higher Education Context

Several studies on caring practices highlighted cultural differences (Barrow, 2015; Noddings, 2012)

and inclusivity challenges related to issues concerning minority groups, disabilities, displacements, and finances (Baice et al., 2021; Guzzard et al., 2021). Hence, caring practices and recommendations in these studies are directed to addressing some of the challenges faced in these specific contexts. In order to understand some of the needs that my caring practices are directed towards, an overview of the general context of Singapore's society, university students' concerns, and NIE is necessary. While there are overlaps in concerns between students from Singapore and students from other societies, there are also significant differences in challenges faced by Singapore's students that need to be explained to contextualize the caring practices discussed in section 3.

## 2.1 Meritocracy, success, and university students

Because Singapore society has embraced the ideology of meritocracy, most Singaporeans believe in the narrative that upward social mobility is achieved through hard work and education is the means to change one's fortune (Koh, 2014; Teo, 2018). This belief led to a work-centric culture. As a result, Singapore often ranks badly in international surveys for overworking and work-life balance (Today Online, 2019; Kisi, 2022). The education system is also viewed as a means for economic development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010), leading to an emphasis on academic achievements in order for a student to obtain "good" jobs with their attendant wealth and status. It is therefore unsurprising when a local survey conducted by the Inter-University Network in 2022 reported that university students have a "deep-seated and unhealthy obsession" with grades due to its implications for job-hunting after graduation (Chan, 2022; Lim, 2022). This is reflected in the findings that Singapore university students' top three sources of stress are work/study commitments, self-confidence, and career prospects after university (Lim, 2022).

As such, one of the current pressing concerns in Singapore is the narrow definition of success as tangibly measured by grades, jobs, and wealth. In separately reported events, two of Singapore's ministers, Chun Sing Chan (Education) and Edwin Tong (Culture, Community and Youth), highlighted the need for Singapore to redefine what success means (Ministry of Education, 2022) and move away from a culture of striving or hustling for the "best" (Lim, 2022) due to rising awareness of mental health issues in Singapore society.

## 2.2 NIE's context

In NIE, there are additional unique circumstances that are important considerations in my practice of care for students. NIE is Singapore's only teacher training institute and it collaborates closely with the Ministry of Education (MOE). MOE is the employer of all public school teachers (ranging from primary schools to junior colleges) and in order to be admitted into NIE, interested parties have to apply through MOE and go through a selection process that includes interviews. Those who are successful in their application have their university tuition fully funded by MOE and are given a monthly stipend ranging from S\$1,800 to S\$3,650 (US\$1,290 to US\$2,617) while they go through their studies (Ministry of Education, 2021). Depending on the teacher training program that they undergo, the students are bonded to MOE for three or four years after their graduation from NIE. Should students fail to graduate, resign or are terminated from the teaching service, damages will have to be paid to MOE. As such, the students are considered hired by MOE from the moment they commence their studies in NIE and are generally discouraged from working while studying.

There are broadly three programs offered to students in NIE – the bachelor's degree program, the diploma program, and the post-graduate diploma in education (PGDE) program for those who have obtained their bachelor's degrees elsewhere. I commonly have younger students (late teens to early twenties) in my undergraduate/diploma classes and older students (ranging from fresh university

graduates to those who graduated years ago and have been working in different careers) in the PGDE classes. Generally, due to differences in their age range, I observe that more PGDE students have to juggle studies and family life because they are married, have children, and perhaps even care for elderly parents at home.

As a lecturer in the English Language (EL) department of NIE since 2019, I have taught a range of compulsory EL modules on both the bachelor's degree and PGDE programs. Some compulsory modules are graded, which affect students' Grade Point Average (GPA), while others are simply pass or fail modules. Generally, undergraduate students are concerned about their GPA because it determines whether they graduate with (direct) honors or not. As the starting salary of teachers are partly influenced by academic qualifications rather than the level taught, students tend to be more grade-sensitive in compulsory graded modules.

In sum, NIE students' typical concerns include grade-consciousness, self-confidence, relevance and application of the knowledge taught to their chosen career path, management of studies and family commitments, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the students receive a fully funded education and a stipend as employees of MOE, financial difficulties or uncertainties over their career prospects are not areas of care that are required from me.

### **3 Reflection on Care in Teaching Practice**

In the following subsections, I first discuss relevant care considerations developed by Noddings (1984, 2012) and other scholars before sharing my attempts in showing care for the students I have taught thus far. The care considerations are broadly categorized into (1) positionality of the teacher, (2) negotiation of needs, and (3) pedagogical design. In terms of positionality of the teacher, I explore how awareness of self-identity and power asymmetries affect relationships with students. I start with positionality to emphasize the relational aspect of care, which is learner-centric rather than work-centric. This is followed by negotiation of needs where I discuss the importance of having a dialogue with students on their needs, potential challenges in meeting their needs, and possible solutions. Lastly, I focus on pedagogical design that creates emotionally and psychologically safe learning environments. As I will show, these last two care considerations help mitigate the negative effects of a competitive and work-centric culture. Throughout the subsections, I refer to NIE's qualitative student feedback that I have received between 2019 and 2022 as evidence of my care.

#### **3.1 Positionality of self in relation to students**

Noddings (1984, 2012) emphasized that relationships are fundamental in care ethics. Her development of this idea was influenced by Martin Buber's pivotal work on I-Thou and I-It relations (Noddings, 1984). The I-Thou relationship is characterized by qualities like authenticity and mutuality where we meet each other as who we really are. The idea of mutuality implies the understanding that the "I" in the relationship has to make space within oneself to receive the "Thou" and vice versa. In the I-It relationship, the other is perceived as an object for analysis or use. This relegates the relationship to one that is utilitarian and exploitative in nature. For example, Barrow (2015) noted that students could be perceived as "receptors of the teacher's knowledge" (p. 47). If students were objects to be filled up, teachers would only concern themselves with the contents of the subject and deliver the planned content accordingly (and perhaps, inflexibly) without regard for the students' needs. Thus, the dialogue that occurs in I-Thou relationships is significantly different from I-It relationships.

Application of the I-Thou relationship understanding to higher education as a demonstration of care means recognizing students as persons (not young children) who enter our classrooms with varied

beliefs, assumptions, desires, motivations, interests, and experiences (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). It is a disservice to both teachers and students when teachers discount what students can offer in the classroom. Noddings (2012) noted that making space within oneself to receive students entails listening and being attentive. There are a few implications for teachers' positioning of self in relation to students: (1) be aware of potentially conflicting aspects within our identities like that of student-teacher or researcher-teacher, (2) do not harbor preconceived ideas of students that are based on our own assumptions or experiences (Baice et al., 2021), and (3) remember we are not always the expert in the classroom (Barrow, 2015; Gravett & Winstone, 2022).

When I started teaching university students, I struggled in this positioning of myself, and it affected my relationship and interactions with students. The confusion stemmed from the fact that when I first started teaching in university as a part-time tutor, I was doing my PhD studies. Hence, I was not only a tutor/teacher; I was also a student. This uneasy meeting of different identities was most apparent when I tutored for my PhD supervisor in one of their undergraduate classes. I attended the lectures and taught one of the tutorial groups. I remember distinctly that I did not feel confident in the subject matter because I was a student. However, as the tutor in front of the undergraduate students, I was supposed to be "the expert". The conflicting identities was the reason for this student's qualitative feedback on my teaching at the time:

1. *Be confident enough to stand up to prof [my supervisor] when she strays from the module topic. Although in fairness, us students might not have been very open with you about our opinions so... also be more proactive in canvassing student feedback, I suppose.* (italics added for emphasis)

Receiving this feedback at the end of the semester left a deep impression and led me to reflect on my positioning of self in the classroom. I recalled noticing instances of digression by my supervisor during the lectures. However, I had decided to not raise the issue with my supervisor as I felt that I was not in a position to give feedback. Comment (1) reminded me that I was not only a student, but also a tutor. Because the student who wrote the feedback was unaware of the tension in my positionality, they pointed out my lack of confidence in speaking up to my supervisor and noted that as students, they were also not forthcoming in their opinions to me. This is an example of how our identities lead to asymmetries in power in the classroom that in turn affects interactions and the building of caring relationships (Anderson et al., 2020; Barrow, 2015; Gravett & Winstone, 2022).

Moreover, as I was new to teaching university students at the time, to avoid treating them like young children, I went to the other extreme of assuming that they were completely independent and self-motivated adults. This translated to situations where I did not call on students' names to answer questions as I assumed they would volunteer to answer questions and be engaged with each other's contributions. Naturally, it did not work out well and the classes ended up with awkward silences and everyone did not know how to proceed. It was thus significant that the student's feedback above stated that I should have taken the first step to reach out and listen to the students. As Baice et al. (2021) pointed out, when we educators "[assign] responsibility and decision-making to students" (p. 260) based on the perception that they are adults with all of our preconceived ideas of what being an adult means, we do not take into account the realities faced by students who might hold different understandings of adulthood. This particular lesson learnt in the course of my early years in teaching university students has since translated into my current practices of (in)forming my position in class.

As mentioned, I was an NIE student and a primary school teacher before I eventually became a lecturer in NIE. This means that I was not only a lecturer to the students who attended the modules I taught; as an ex-teacher, I also viewed myself as a mentor who experienced the teacher training process and the reality of teaching in a primary school. Therefore, when I started new classes, I had the tendency not to simply introduce myself as their tutor/lecturer, but also to highlight the fact that I used to be a primary school teacher in order to establish common ground with the students. Throughout the course of teaching, I enacted my role as mentor by sharing relevant personal teaching experiences in order to

demonstrate the connection between theories and their future teaching practices. In recognizing that students, especially those in the PGDE program, had varied experiences in schools, I often invited them to share their experiences and opinions with the entire class so that we could learn from each other. I hoped that such a practice validated their experiences and built their self-confidence. To this end, I included this sharing activity in the lesson plan instead of filling it up with only what I wanted to address. During the sharing sessions, I took on a more facilitative (rather than expert) role to help students draw connections and synthesize their learning. This process of recognizing the “multiplicity of experiences” (p. 370) and provision of space for dialogic interactions is supported by Gravett and Winstone’s (2022) findings as part of caring pedagogies. As shown by the following examples of qualitative student feedback over the years, my students received this positioning of myself in relation to them well:

2. She adds value to our learning by *sharing anecdotal recounts on communication issues from her past teaching experience*, and is also *genuine in caring for our well-being in her capacity as a senior educator*.
3. She brings in *various perspectives and scenarios from the school context*. She *validates everyone’s experiences and views*.
4. She’s *very kind and welcoming to questions* and very encouraging in class.
5. She is clear and focused on the topic, and provides good insights. *I also like the discussion provided, so we may learn and hear from each other*.
6. She *listens to everyone’s opinions and gives time and space for us to express ourselves*. She is not judgmental.
7. She is *willing to give space to our questions in class and allows discussion to continue instead of curtailing it for the sake of the lesson*. Able to connect back to the point of the lesson too.

Comments (2) and (3) demonstrate students’ awareness and appreciation of my positioning as a mentor through the sharing of my teaching experience. In particular, (2) wrote, “in her capacity as a senior educator” which highlighted my seniority as an educator in relation to them. Comments (4) to (7) show the impact of relinquishing control as an expert to take on the role of a facilitator so as to make space for students through listening and dialogic interactions (Gravett & Winstone, 2022; Noddings, 1984, 2012). These students highlighted their awareness of my attempts to value their perspectives during discussions. In contrast to comment (1), these comments demonstrate my awareness of the power difference between my students and me.

As noted by several researchers, the educator who is in the position of power needs to take the first step in order to establish an I-Thou relationship (Anderson et al., 2020; Barrow, 2015; Gravett & Winstone, 2022; Noddings, 1984). Comments (6) and (7) especially noted my provision of time and space to address students’ questions and needs rather than avoided it for the sake of the lesson I planned. As observed by Kinchin (2022) and Pranjić (2021), it takes courage to release control and allow students to help shape the direction of lessons because students could raise unexpected views. This also implies that when I teach the same topic to different tutorial classes in the same module, the direction and depth of every class discussion are different because what may be of concern to one class may not be of concern to another.

### 3.2 Negotiation of needs

Considering the varied experiences and understandings of being a university student (Baice et al., 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2022), it is important for caring teachers to be attentive and receptive of students’ needs. As Noddings (2012) noted,

*From the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as carer is interested in the expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum*

*as a prescribed course of study. We can therefore anticipate a possible conflict that will have to be resolved by caring teachers... (p. 772)*

Noddings' observation highlighted the possible tensions that teachers face when students' expressed needs are at odds with needs that institutions assume students have (or assumed needs). In addition, teachers' needs can also come into conflict with students' expressed needs (Anderson et al., 2020; Barrow, 2015; Pranjić, 2021). Further, Barrow (2015) and Guzzardo et al. (2021) cautioned that in listening to students' needs there always remains the question of whether we should address those needs. I have learnt that even if their needs cannot be met, having a dialogue with the students is an important part of care in the teacher-student relationship. After all, research on university students' perspectives on care and good teaching showed that being open and flexible in the creation of pedagogical space to accommodate similarities and differences are characteristics of care that aids in students' learning and success (Anderson et al., 2020; Guzzardo et al., 2021). Therefore, a caring teacher has to take into account the different needs (e.g., students' self-esteem, well-being, and academic grades) and attempt to resolve them through dialogue to reach a common understanding. Rather than to make assumptions about students' needs, I found it helpful to spend time talking about both my and students' needs at the very beginning of the semester. I only included discussions on institutional needs when they were a conflicting factor. If there was a mismatch, we discussed possible compromises or solutions to resolve the issue. As I will show with some examples, the time spent on discussing and negotiating the meeting of needs is not wasted because it sets the tone and foundation for the development of a relationship of care and trust (Noddings, 2012).

Being the tutor for one of the graded compulsory modules which had challenging readings and a number of assignments, I had no control over the requirements set by the chair of the module. When I first started teaching this module, I received negative feedback regarding the workload expected of students. Part of their unhappiness stemmed from the difficulty in obtaining a high grade for this module, which affected their GPA. In subsequent years, when I talked about expectations of this module with my students, I asked if they had heard about the module from their seniors. Should there be any negative impressions, I addressed them directly by stating that although I could not change the readings or assignments, I could support them in understanding the readings. I also followed up by asking them what support they needed while persuading them to think beyond grades as the module is relevant to how we see the world and live as better people. Thus, to me, success in this module meant that their worldviews changed for the better rather than acing the assignments. After I started this practice, I hardly saw negative feedback regarding the difficulties of this module. Instead, most students reported that they were able to grasp the concepts and were challenged to think more critically about hegemonic ideologies like meritocracy in our society. This shows that even when the difficulty level remains the same, caring pedagogical practices can potentially help students to perceive a difficulty in a more positive light.

To give another example, I also taught EL modules which I might not have sufficient expertise in. Such a situation was created by institutional needs like insufficient manpower and workload distribution that conflicted with my need to only teach familiar topics. This also led to issues with meeting students' learning needs. Rather than hiding my insecurities, I found that acknowledging my lack of sufficient knowledge and taking proactive steps to meet students' learning needs is a better decision. For example, I had to teach pedagogical grammar, which is rather technical in nature. Although my expertise is not in this area, with the help of supportive colleagues, I familiarized myself with some of the concepts taught. Even then, I found myself in situations where I could not answer questions from students. Subsequently, upon the advice of a more experienced colleague, during my introduction in the first lesson, I told students that I was not an expert in the area of grammar. However, I added that it should not stop them from asking me questions because I could learn from them. In addition, I promised that whatever questions I was unable to answer, I would check with my colleagues and provide a response later. Being able to fulfill the promise made to students strengthened trust in the caring relation as shown in the following comments:

8. Dr Teo *follows up [with] the queries* that we had in class. *Shows that she cares* and doesn't leave us hanging.

9. *Honouring her word* and getting back to us with our questions, on questions that she's unsure about.

Additionally, I found that even if there were no solutions, simply addressing the constraints that prevented me from fulfilling their needs helped us to understand one another. For example, I once taught about ten different tutorial groups (with an average of 20 students per class). I explained to them that it was difficult for me to remember the names of around 100 students. Moreover, with the COVID-19 restrictions for everyone to wear a mask on campus, I also explained that it was more challenging for me to remember faces. Thus, while I might find some of them familiar-looking outside of class and greet them, I might not recognize all of them (but it should not stop them from approaching me). My students understood the circumstances and responded empathetically after my explanations. This shows that while remembering students by their names is important (Barrow, 2015; Guzzardo et al., 2021), it is not a non-negotiable necessity for care as long as constraints are communicated. In the end-of-semester feedback, no student commented that I did not remember their name.

Similar to Anderson et al.'s (2020) observation that "care, demonstrated through openness, involves attention to, not avoidance of, troublesome knowledge" (p. 13), my experience shows that university students do not expect us to be perfect in meeting every single need of theirs because they are mature enough to understand different and, sometimes, conflicting needs (e.g., institutional needs and teacher's needs). As teachers, we should similarly not expect perfection from students. In moving beyond a grade-conscious and work-centric culture to focus on relationships, the important thing is to verbalize needs, explain conflicts, their constraints, and where possible, involve students to find solutions. This communication additionally provides opportunities for students to exercise their autonomy and empathy.

### 3.3 Pedagogical design for students' well-being

An additional consideration in designing care pedagogies is a safe learning environment (Anderson et al., 2020; Pranjić, 2021; Robinson et al., 2020). In Singapore's context where university students are found to be highly grade-focused and low in self-confidence (Chan, 2022; Lim, 2022), there tends to be silence in the classrooms. With the COVID-19 pandemic, additional concerns like lengthy screen time or "Zoom fatigue" (Blum, 2020; Ramachandran, 2021) have to be taken into account as well when planning lessons. The following subsections explain the demonstration of care through the design of safe learning environments that protect students' emotional and psychological well-being.

#### 3.3.1 Creating safe learning environments

Anderson et al.'s (2020) study noted two ways of regarding safe spaces in education. The first views the classroom as a greenhouse that perpetually protects students from the outside world. This is observed in the practice of some universities where physical safe spaces are provided for students to enter so as to avoid listening to or engaging in difficult or troublesome discourse (e.g., political, racial, and religious issues) that conflicts with their beliefs and values. The second views the classroom as a nursery, a controlled environment where students can learn, develop, and mature before leaving and being exposed fully to the elements outside. This is found through Anderson et al.'s (2020) interviews of university students who defined caring teachers as nurturing and used the analogy that students are like young vulnerable plants who need to be cultivated and nurtured by teachers in order to grow. In my planning of safe learning environments, I subscribe to the latter view. It is inevitable that students (and teachers) would possess different values, attitudes, and worldviews, and that these might come into conflict in the classroom (Pranjić, 2021). For example, conflicts might arise from different political viewpoints



in analysis of texts. Therefore, teachers have the responsibility to create conditions in which students can freely express their views, make mistakes, fail, and still be accepted, understood, and respected, especially in Singapore's highly competitive education system.

In order to create a safe learning environment, I established the following "rules of engagement" at the beginning of the semester:

- Whether there are right or wrong answers, the reasoning behind responses is most important to me as the tutor. This also means that there are no stupid questions.
- Views shared in the class, should not be repeated outside class.
- Students must be respectful towards each other (e.g., no name-calling, discuss ideas and not persons, etc.). However, the words used in discussions may occasionally be inappropriate or offensive. Students should not be averse to such words as these are opportunities for them to learn how to engage in an academic discussion and improve their expression of ideas.

Additionally, in my responses to students in class, I made the conscious effort to avoid using words like "wrong" and "incorrect". Instead, I asked the students to explain their answers. I also ensured that my responses to students were unbiased when discussing controversial issues by considering differing positions. This remains as a challenge because of the influx of emotionally laden information in media, social media, and other communication platforms, where people are swept up in division and extreme positions. I require time and space to learn and reflect on different issues and their arguments to arrive at a point where I see the value of all sides. However, this did not mean that I sat on the fence. In my earlier years of learning to facilitate classroom discussions, students wrote in their feedback that they did not learn or gain anything new. From my informal observations, students had eureka moments when they realized that issues are not always black or white. While I did not avoid stating my own positions on those issues, I always elaborated on why I arrived at my conclusions without imposing them on the students. Being mindful that students are independent thinkers, I encouraged them to reflect critically on topics under discussion before deciding on their positions, which could be different from mine. When students presented new ideas, I verbalized my appreciation for their contributions by thanking them for helping me learn something new. In setting this tone in the classroom, I noticed that the students were willing to share their thoughts, ask questions, and disagree with me (with some even giving me critiques).

As shown by student feedback presented below, the safe learning space I created provided opportunities for students to give voice to different difficult issues and make mistakes without being subjected to judgment (13) or shame (11). It can also be seen from feedback (14) that being able to have fun in class contributes to a safe environment where students are not intimidated by either the rigor of the content or the teacher. The creation of such an environment reduces competitiveness, increases collaboration, and develops students' confidence (Noddings, 2012), which is especially important in Singapore's meritocratic context. Here are some comments from student feedback:

10. She promotes deep thinking on the issues on race, culture and gender and allows for *safe discussions* with everyone in class.
11. She's engaging and created an effective learning community. *We've been able to learn from one another's mistakes without feeling shame.* She's clear in her explanations and makes efforts to clarify our doubts in a simplified manner.
12. Dr Teo is flexible in her teaching and is approachable so that *students are unafraid to ask her questions.*
13. She is extremely knowledgeable and very patient. Her explanations are always very clear and easy to understand. *There is also no judgement if you don't understand or if you are slow to understand.*
14. I found it *very fun*, the videos used, tutorials were really fun like the IPA worksheet, in class activities were engaging. It all really gave me deep appreciation for linguistics. *I also liked the vibes of the class, not intimidating at all. Thank you for being kind!*

The comments above demonstrate that a safe learning space is defined by the elimination of fear, shame, and judgement (Anderson et al., 2020; Pranjić, 2021). While the creation of such an environment starts from the first lesson with the setting of expectations, it is important to realize that the teacher has to continually reinforce emotional and psychological safety through their choice of words during classroom interactions.

### 3.3.2 Creating flexible online learning environments

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a need to shift to online classes. The fact that my university has been promoting blended learning and flipped classroom pedagogies in the last few years helped me in the process. One practical suggestion that supported the creation of learning experiences used the five phases of design thinking: “empathize with learners, define the learners’ needs, create ideas for innovative solutions, prototype, and test” (Conceição & Howles, 2020, p. 137). With the first two phases of empathizing with learners and defining their needs, the design thinking process of creating online lessons is highly compatible with the ethics of care. As Robinson et al. (2020) concluded, “From a care perspective, considerations for students with full-time jobs, family obligations, and other responsibilities must be echoed in course design and delivery” (p. 106).

In one of the courses that I taught during the lockdown, the schedule was two full days of lessons with three-hour blocks before and after a one-hour lunch break. The idea of conducting a three-hour lesson on Zoom was daunting for me and the students because of Zoom fatigue. As noted by Blum (2020) and Ramachandran (2021), the cognitive load is higher on platforms like Zoom due to the unnatural nonverbal cues, ‘one speaker at a time’ type of conversations, and switching of screens as compared to classroom interactions. Moreover, this module was for the PGDE students, who were more likely to have family members to care for at home and might need a longer lunch break. A lengthier time spent online might result in students having to prioritize school over family or vice versa. As I did not want to create any tension in work-life balance, I re-examined the learning materials to design flexible flipped online lessons that did not compromise on the objectives while accommodating their needs.

In designing a flipped lesson to reduce time spent on Zoom, I changed all the lecture portions to self-directed e-learning and kept only the discussion activities for synchronous online teaching and learning. This led to a halving of Zoom hours with just one three-hour online lesson after lunch per day. To achieve this, I had to spend time compiling a list of learning resources (ranging from infographics, videos, and readings) on the topic for self-directed e-learning. I included guiding and reflection questions for students so that they understood what they needed to focus on. To monitor their progress, I created an online forum for students to share their thoughts on the questions I posed. Consequently, during the Zoom lessons, I was able to fully address their questions. Additionally, to ensure that the Zoom sessions were interactive with varied communication patterns (e.g., peer-to-peer, student-to-teacher, etc.), I organized both small group discussions in breakout rooms and whole class presentations. Feedback from lessons planned with students’ online learning needs in mind shows that the reduced contact time online did not compromise learning:

15. She is *cognizant of students’ needs and is flexible in her mode of teaching.*
16. She handles student queries over Zoom well and gives feedback that helps to close learning gaps. *Ample time is given for self-directed learning - this is more preferred than packing all the lesson content into one Zoom session. Gives time for screen break too.*
17. I like that it has been interactive as we were asked to ponder on some questions along the way. *The pace is also just right as we were given enough time on and away from the computer screen.*
18. I like that she *allows time away to do our own readings and watch videos.* It allows me to be engaged and *gives me relief from zoom fatigue.*

Comment (15) demonstrates student's awareness of how I had deliberately taken their needs into account through the planning of a flexible lesson, i.e., the flipped lesson allowed students to organize and pace their learning according to their needs. Comments (16) to (18) additionally highlight students' appreciation that they were given time away from the computer, which prevented Zoom fatigue. Overall, applying flipped classroom pedagogy to online learning environments successfully engaged students while meeting their needs.

## 4 Conclusion & Recommendations

One might say that we should treat adults as adults. However, in taking a care perspective, I realized that it is easier said than done. Much effort is required to care for adult students. I have now learnt that:

1. Caring for students begins with knowing who I am and assumptions that I hold about my position and students' position.
2. I need to take the first step in reaching out to students through listening and creating space for sharing their thoughts and experiences. This includes having a dialogue on meeting or not meeting different needs, their reasons, and negotiating acceptable solutions (which should be honored).
3. I do not need to be in control over every aspect of the lesson; instead, I should allow students to co-create the lesson content (within the boundaries of the lesson objectives) with me. This includes being flexible in the mode and pace of learning.
4. I am responsible for the creation of an emotionally and psychologically safe learning environment through setting the "rules of engagement" and my choice of responses in all classroom interactions.

These care principles helped me to better support my students' learning (e.g., make theory-practice connections, perceive difficulties more positively) and well-being (e.g., become more confident, avoid Zoom fatigue). Moreover, they also mitigated the stressors students were facing.

Reflecting on the teaching philosophy that I wrote in 2018, I have come to a greater understanding of its weight due to the various challenges that have to be met. My growth as a teacher came in the form of a greater depth of understanding of tertiary students' needs and breadth of pedagogical practices to practice care. This growth could only have occurred because of my fundamental belief in the importance of care in higher education. To build relationships with students, engage them, and guide them in their development, I am thus motivated to listen to and understand their needs. Moreover, even as I reflect on my care practices, I am well aware that it is always work-in-progress because every student, every class is different, and I continue to learn in my journey as a teacher.

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***Cherise Shi Ling Teo*** is a lecturer in the English Language & Literature Academic Group in National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. She obtained a PhD in English Language from the National University of Singapore. Her research interests are teacher professional development, sociolinguistics, and critical discourse analysis.