

Service-Learning Practices and Reflections in the Perspective of Nel Noddings' Theory of Caring Education: The "Care for the Elderly" Service-Learning Program as an Example

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Abstract: Nel Noddings' ethics of care is an important lineage of Western moral education thought, which contains deep humanistic values. Service-learning advocates the equal importance of service and learning, and emphasizes more on the discovery of educational connotations in practice. Based on the social background of aging, this paper takes the "Care for the Elderly" service-learning program as an example, attempts to take the care ethics as the entry point, adopts interviews, questionnaires, and other research methods, and opens-up the service-learning practice path under the threshold of Nel Noddings' care education theory.

Keywords: Nel Noddings' theory of caring education; Service-learning; Caring education

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1. Introduction

According to China's seventh national population census, there are 20.56 million elderly people aged 65 years and above ^[1]. Volunteer activities such as "Caring for the Elderly" have different motives and lack theoretical support, making it difficult to take into account the spiritual and psychological needs of the elderly. Under the perspective of Nel Noddings' theory of caring ethics, this paper attempts to take the perspective of caring ethics as an entry point, and promote students' moral and intellectual co-education through carrying out high school students' service-learning programs.

2. Theoretical overview

2.1. Overview of the theory of caring education

2.1.1. The caring relationship of intersubjectivity

Noddings argued that caring is a relational practice. From here, we can see that Noddings' ethics of care is

characterized by intersubjectivity of interpersonal relations. Under the theoretical threshold of intersubjectivity, “my” experience and “his” experience coexist in the same world, the world is not an externalization of my spirit, but a world that everyone can perceive and understand. From this, we can see that only in the interpersonal relationship characterized by intersubjectivity, the “care” between human beings will not turn into “pity.” Therefore, whether it is Noddings’ “equal relationship” (e.g., lover, friend, colleague, and neighbor) or “unequal relationship” (e.g., parent-child, teacher-student relationship) in which the members of the relationship implement caring or harvest caring, they all have their own values and possibilities to be realized in the theory of caring, because they are all in the intersubjective nature.

2.1.2. Two-way reciprocal needs attention

Noddings wrote: “At every stage of life, we need to be cared for by others, and we need to be understood, accepted, and recognized at all times. Similarly, we also need to care for others”^[2]. In Noddings’ theory, the starting point and ending point of “caring” are “people,” which itself contains great humanistic value and power. Based on the humanistic theory of Abraham H. Maslow, Noddings proposed to incorporate the identification and categorization of needs into the theory of caring, pointing out that we should care for the material and spiritual life of self and others, identify the needs of self and others, and give appropriate care to those who are in need, and that paying attention to one’s own needs as well as the needs of others is the first step in establishing caring relationships. In addition, Noddings also put the needs in the caring interpersonal relationship, that is, the needs of others and the needs of the self are in the same directions, and the real “self-actualization” will necessarily include the full development of the caring ability to be accommodated with the outside world^[3]. Noddings’ caring relationship is not a one-way emotional output, but a two-way attention to needs and feedback.

2.1.3. Caring practices for implementing actions

Noddings also proposed a specific practical process for caring education: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation^[4]. Taking “Caring for the Elderly” as an example: the caregiver who cares for the elderly is the learner’s “role model,” and through observation and imitation of the role model’s caring behaviors, the learner acquires caring thoughts, skills, and behavioral patterns, and the learner’s motivation to care for the elderly is inspired. “Dialogue” connects people and makes it possible to build caring relationships”^[2]. Dialogue is the process of building caring interpersonal relationships, in which learners engage in formal or informal dialogues with the elderly, their relatives, community workers, mentors, etc. These dialogues are open-ended and have no fixed answers, and the dialogues can motivate both the caregiver and the cared to enter the caring situation in order to prepare for the practice of caring. The “practice” and “confirmation” are the initiation of caring actions and reflection on the results of caring. The caregiver notices and analyzes the caring needs of the cared for person to provide assistance, such as helping the elderly to use the phones, helping the elderly to relieve their worries, walking with the elderly and so on, at the same time, the caregiver improves his caring ability and gains the recognition of other people, which stimulates the motivation of the caregiver to form a virtuous caring motivation again, forming a virtuous caring cycle.

2.2. Overview of service-learning

Service-learning, which emerged in the United States in the 1960s, is a student-centered learning model which advocates that students flexibly apply what they have learned to serve others in authentic social service situations, gain experience, and continue to reflect on their experiences, and ultimately become “responsible citizens.” It can be seen that although there are similarities between service-learning and volunteering activities,

it is more focused on exploring the educational connotations of service activities, and the logical starting point of service-learning is a win-win situation for both the service provider (learner) and the person being served.

Therefore, service-learning has deeper educational significance than voluntary activities. From the perspective of purpose, service-learning is not a self-interested behavior out of reaping socio-political and economic benefits, but more directed to the development of students' personality quality and maintaining social moral order by cultivating qualified citizens. From the structural point of view, service-learning is a learning system with relatively compact structure, and theoretical knowledge is necessary for service activities. From the perspective of process, service learning has a clear process of practice, such as, Kaye believes that research, preparation and planning, action, reflection, and presentation are the five links of service-learning. In terms of effectiveness, the impact of service-learning is long-lasting for the learner, and the "end" of service-learning is usually the "beginning" of another, and the awareness of problems and participation developed through service-learning leads to active and continuous service-learning ^[5].

Thus, service-learning is different from the traditional "service" in the sense that it is a process that stimulates the caring spirit of the participants, reshapes the knowledge, and applies it to the actual situation. Learning in service-learning is also different from learning in the school classroom in that it guides learners to acquire knowledge from experience and to care about knowledge construction, to practice on their own without being formal, and to dedicate themselves to the society while realizing their own value. Service and learning are equally important.

2.3. Exploring the need to integrate the theory of caring education and service-learning

2.3.1. Integrating into the educational goal of moral education

Around the 1960s in the United States, with the rapid advance of the industrialization process led to the prevalence of individualism and the intensification of social alienation, the social moral order has been strongly impacted, based on this reflection and the emergence of communitarianism to criticize the individual rights and utilitarianism-based moral theory, and put forward the citizens should not be concerned only about the "small self," but also care about others and the development of society. Therefore, the background of the emergence of service-learning determines that the purpose of service learning is to cultivate responsible and caring citizens and to build harmonious interpersonal relationships and stabilize the social order, which is also what Noddings' theory of caring education seeks to achieve. The caring theory tries to awaken people's lost moral concepts by constructing caring, responsible, and warm interpersonal relationships, so as to cultivate new caring people and build a harmonious society. It can be seen that the theory of caring education and the practice of service-learning share a common goal and value orientation.

2.3.2. Opening-up practical paths for the theory of caring education

"If we want people to live an ethical life and care for others, then we should provide opportunities for people to practice caring skills. More importantly, give them opportunities to develop the necessary character attitudes, to advocate the practice of caring, and to cultivate attitudes of concern for others" ^[2], Noddings paid much attention to the practical application of caring education, and she had put forward her own views on school curriculum planning and teaching: it is suggested that teachers and students should become curriculum builders together in order to replace the traditional teacher-centered curriculum planning, and teachers should utilize reasonable teaching resources to design the direction of children's development. This shows that Noddings had already developed the initial idea of integrating care education into the curriculum program, but there is still much room for development, which is an opportunity for the integration of care education theory and service-learning. Service-learning has been gradually improved by scholars from various countries, and while forming

a relatively complete system structure, service-learning can also flexibly change the learning mode and content according to the objects and situations of service, which is highly practical. Therefore, service-learning can be used as a carrier of caring education and to demonstrate the way to open-up the practical path of caring education.

2.3.3. Improving the educational value of service-learning practice

The National Commission on Service-Learning discusses that service-learning is a pedagogical approach that combines community service and coursework, rather than a volunteer program or community service project that is unconnected to academic knowledge, which means that there must be some intellectual connection between service and learning. Service-learning is different from the traditional classroom in that it is usually presented in the form of projects and activities, which requires deep theoretical support to avoid the casual participation of learners that makes service-learning a mere formality. The Noddings' caring theory pays more attention to the quality of service-learning rather than the number of times, and recognizes more on the process of service-learning rather than the result. When learners put into service-learning program practice with understanding and care between people, service-learning is multiplied with the temperature of philosophical care. The service-learning practice under the Noddings' caring theory not only has the effect of "teaching" but also has the value of "nurturing."

3. Practicing caring in service-learning using the example of the "Care for the Elderly" caring service-learning project

In the context of "Caring for the Elderly" volunteer activities in a community in City A, the author conducted a one-month service-learning project with a study group of 34 high school students. The service-learning program was guided by Noddings' theory of caring education, and strictly implemented the complete service-learning process, including preparation, service, and reflection. The service-learning program was conducted twice a week, and the study adopted the interview method and questionnaire method to collect data, with a total of 34 students participating in the questionnaire survey and a 100% recovery rate of the questionnaires, and the design of pre-tests and post-tests.

3.1. Caring service-learning project delivery sessions

3.1.1. Preparation: exploring care needs

Preparation is the starting stage of service-learning, in which learners understand the composition of internal members, and analyze the nature and extent of community needs. In the "Caring for the Elderly" caring service-learning project, the tutor took the Noddings' theory of caring education as the guiding principle, focusing on the construction of "inter-subjective interpersonal relationships," the exploration of "two-way reciprocal needs concern" and implementing "action caring practices" in this service-learning project. Under the guidance of the mentor, students clarified the concept of caring, explored the caring needs of the elderly in the community through designing questionnaires, conducting interviews, using various media such as books, cell phones, computers, etc., and collaborated in small groups to design various ways to build caring relationships.

3.1.2. Service: building caring relationships

Service is a practical aspect of action, a direct result of preparation and planning, in which learners' ideas, experiences, talents, skills, knowledge, enthusiasm, and motivation to empathize with others can be exercised and enhanced ^[5]. In the "Caring for the Elderly" caring service-learning project, learners discussed the concept

of caring in the preparation session and explored the caring needs of the elderly such as reasonable diet, spiritual needs, psychological comfort. Based on the above, members of the service-learning project team took the initiative to build caring relationships with the elderly through a variety of targeted measures.

3.1.3. Reflection: improving the quality of care

Reflection is the most important aspect of service-learning, and it is an important and constantly renewing process that occurs throughout service-learning. Reflection is a “transforming experience,” comparing initial assumptions and preconceptions with what one sees and experiences in the real world^[5]. In this service-learning project, learners adopted a variety of ways to reflect, for example, when it was difficult to establish a trusting relationship with the elderly during the service process, learners solved the problem by seeking help from the tutor, consulting the information, and conducting in-depth interviews, etc. After the service-learning project was completed, learners reflected and summarized the service-learning project by writing journals, writing letters to the elderly, and discussing the project in small groups, etc., so as to deepen their understanding of “care.”^[6-7]

3.2. Comparison of pre-test and post-test of learners’ participation in caring service-learning

3.2.1. Pre-test and post-test comparison of learners’ responses to questions related to “Caring for the Elderly”

In the preparation for service-learning, learners received the following knowledge training under the guidance of the tutor: population aging, the current situation of the elderly population in China, the Act on the Protection System for the Elderly in Various Countries, the Noddings’ Theory of Care, and caring for the elderly, etc., and applied what they had learned in their service-learning.^[8] As shown in **Table 1**, before the program began, most students were not familiar with the Security Act related to old age.

Table 1. Pre-test and post-test comparison of learners’ responses to questions related to Security Act

File	Pre-test			Post-test		
	Realize	Heard about	Not realize	Realize	Heard about	Not realize
United Nations Principles for Older Persons	-	-	100%	82.3%	17.7%	-
China’s Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of the Elderly	-	8.8%	91.2%	88.2%	11.8%	-
Older Americans Act	-	-	100%	73.5%	26.5%	-
Elderly Persons Welfare Act of Japan	-	-	100%	76.4%	23.6%	-

In the post-test, 97.0% of the learners expressed concern about the current situation of the elderly, which is a significant increase in comparison. In the questions related to volunteering, it is shown that the learning of caring services under the guidance of Noddings’ caring theory helps learners to develop a sense of caring and dedication, and some of the questions selected are shown in **Table 2**. According to the data, it can be seen that under the guidance of caring theory on service-learning practice, learners not only pay attention to the elderly from the level of consciousness and theory, but also willing to put caring for the elderly into practice in their lives.

Table 2. Pre-test and post-test comparison of learners’ responses to selected questions related to “Caring for the Elderly”

	Pre-test			Post-test		
	Agree	Disagree	Currently unknown	Agree	Disagree	Currently unknown
I am aware of the Noddings’ Theory of Caring and would like to use it to inform my service-learning practice.	-	-	100%	100%	-	-
I want to care for the elderly.	94.1%	-	5.9%	100%	-	-
I would like to volunteer at a nursing home.	35.2%	17.6%	47.0%	88.2%	5.8%	5.8%
Building caring relationships is key to caring for seniors.	58.8%	-	41.1%	100%	-	-
I am willing to find the real needs of the elderly in many ways.	50.0%	8.8%	41.1%	94.1%	-	5.8%
I am willing to sacrifice my recreational time to care for the elderly.	26.4%	52.9%	17.6%	88.2%	11.7%	-
I have a responsibility to care for the elderly.	35.2%	52.9%	11.7%	100%	-	-

3.2.2. Pre-test and post-test comparisons of learners’ responses to questions related to “service-learning”

After sorting out the responses to the questions related to “service-learning,” we can see that learners not only have a deeper understanding of service-learning after participating in service-learning, but they also consciously connect volunteering and learning in their volunteer activities. In the pre-test, only 2 (5.8%) had heard of service-learning (SL) but had not practised it. However, in the post-test, we can see that after the learners participated in service-learning, all of them realized the difference between service-learning and volunteering. In service-learning, as shown in **Table 3**, 82.3% of the learners thought that the reflection session was “very important,” and they mentioned in the interviews, “reflection allows me to know what I have done,” “reflection helps me to realize where my shortcomings are.”

Table 3. Post-test results of learners’ responses to questions related to “service-learning”

	Post-test			
	Very important	Critical	General	Unimportant
Preparation	29.4%	70.5%	-	-
Plan	11.7%	85.2%	2.9%	-
Service	100%	-	-	-
Reflection	82.3%	17.6%	-	-

4. Summarizing and reflecting on care-oriented service-learning

4.1. Flexible educational narratives as a method of advancing care-oriented service-learning

In caring service-learning practice, learners and care recipients are often strangers at the beginning, and both parties will not reach the point of complete understanding of each other, but in-depth service-learning practice needs to “go through the experience of others” to better explore each other’s caring needs, then the use of educational narratives can be effective in deepening the understanding of human-to-human relationships^[9]. In self-narrative, learners improve their ability to express themselves and have a desire to care for others, in the

other narratives session, we saw faces that were very different from those in the classroom, who were happy, excited, sad, or sympathetic. In this atmosphere of trusting conversation, each person speaks from his or her heart, and the goal is to care for others^[10]. The dialogues and conversations guided by the educational narrative approach created a caring environment that was relaxed and sincere, and where each person's need to care was honored.

4.2. Equal caring relationships characterize the practice of care-oriented service-learning

There are several pairs of key relationships in caring-oriented service-learning, namely the tutor-learner relationship, the learner-learner relationship, and the carer-cared relationship, all of which are caring in nature and uphold the “equality” orientation of intersubjectivity in practice. In caring-oriented service-learning, mentors with caring literacy hope to set an example for their learners by modeling caring. Teachers become caring first and foremost, and try to establish an equal caring relationship between mentors and students, and mentors also have the responsibility to help learners to develop caring competencies, to create a caring and supportive atmosphere in the learning group, and to encourage everyone to show their strengths and to pool their ideas to problem solving, so that the value of each learner can be manifested, which makes the same tendency of equal caring relationship between learners and learners.^[12-14]

4.3. Proactive caring awareness as a moral outcome of care-oriented service-learning

Noddings' “care” is full of moral emotions, which is a kind of higher emotion unique to human beings, and it plays a role in motivating and regulating moral awareness and moral behavior^[6]. Brain science research shows that human beings can imagine other people's encounters or experiences and partially experience other people's psychological feelings and emotions, which suggests that human beings do not need to intentionally regulate the instinctive emotional impulses naturally. However, in order to maintain and preserve natural caring^[4], the ethical caring cultivated through education can transform the “unintentional caring heart” into an “active caring consciousness.” In caring-oriented service-learning, learners not only know what is caring and why, but also practise caring in real-life situations, forming an active caring consciousness, which makes moral education a real humanistic education full of humanistic colors^[15].

In summary, service-learning carried out under the threshold of Nel Noddings' caring theory is a useful practice of caring education theory.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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