

# INSTRUCTOR CARE AND LEARNER EMPOWERMENT

Examining the Relationship Between Instructor Care and Learner Empowerment

Annika Wong

PLNU Honors Conference 2022

2 April 2022

## **Introduction**

Research in pedagogical communication consistently finds that teacher behaviors are significant predictors of student success and instructor care is one of those teacher behaviors. While care is a common subject of study for pedagogical communication research, it is rarely studied quantitatively. The majority of research that studies care does so through ethnographic or other qualitative research methods but survey research is seldom used because there is no preexisting care scale. It is necessary that care is studied quantitatively because it has major impacts on the success of students and quantitative data on care could allow for people to better understand the factors that affect care and the effects of care in the classroom. Additionally, as the purpose of universities is changing, care is becoming increasingly important in the university setting (Walker et al., 2006, Eurich, 1985) . Care and other relational components of education are now being recognized instead of stigmatized as essential to successful education (Walker et al., 2006; Beard, et. al., 2007; Calafell, 2007). Continuing and expanding on this research by measuring instructor care quantitatively is therefore essential.

Learner empowerment has also been studied in the realm of pedagogical communication but in recent years, attention to it has diminished. Learner empowerment was found to be minimally impacted by student characteristics but substantially impacted by teacher characteristics and behaviors (Houser & Frymier, 2009). Among those studied were instructor clarity and immediacy, but instructor care was never studied in conjunction with learner empowerment. It is therefore time for new and updated information on learner empowerment and quantitative data on instructor care to be added to the study of pedagogical communication.

## **Literature Review**

Communication is defined as the process of encoding and decoding messages between a sender and a receiver in a specific context. It is about creating shared meaning. Because the context of this study is a classroom, this research would fall under the study of pedagogical communication or “the mutual exchange of information between the participants of the educational process by means of verbal and nonverbal expressions (Prucha, 1986)” More specifically, this research falls under pedagogical communication because it looks at exchanges between instructors and students, it takes into account verbal and nonverbal expressions of care, and takes place in the educational process (Noddings, 1984). The purpose of this research is to expand upon the knowledge of care in the classroom by investigating the relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment. This research seeks to discover if there is a relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment and if there is a relationship, examine it more thoroughly.

*Rhetorical and Relational Goals Theory:*

This study will use Rhetorical and Relational Goals Theory (RRGT) to understand the concept of instructor care and its hypothesized relationship to learner empowerment. In 2006 Mottet, Frymier, and Beebe developed RRG T stating that instructors have both rhetorical (academic) and relational goals in the classroom and they use different communication behaviors to achieve goals (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006). RRG T also has six main propositions with the third and fourth are the most applicable to the following study. “Effective teaching is the result of teachers setting appropriate rhetorical and relational goals and using appropriate communication strategies to accomplish their goals; and students are more satisfied with their classroom experience, are more motivated, and will learn and achieve more when their academic and relational needs are met (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006).”

RRGT has often been used to characterize instructor behaviors. For example, teacher clarity or humor might be characterized as a rhetorical behavior used to accomplish a rhetorical goal and immediacy or confirmation would be categorized as a relational behavior. Through this categorization, researchers can isolate variables and better understand what their effects are and what they're affected by. One such study found that both teacher humor and confirmation, one rhetorical and one relational behavior respectively, were indicators of social attraction and attitude homophily (Myers, et. al., 2018). This information, in conjunction with their other data proved that student perceptions of their instructors are influenced by rhetorical and relational behaviors (Myers, et. al., 2018). Additionally, instructor behaviors can satisfy both rhetorical and relational goals. One study found that social presence increased rapport (relational) and perceived confidence, perceived learning, and actual learning (rhetorical) (Frisby, et. al., 2013). Rhetorical and relational goals are interconnected. Therefore it is reasonable to hypothesize that instructor care, a relational instructor behavior, could be related to learner empowerment, a rhetorical goal.

*The University Setting:*

This research is designed to better understand the relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment in the university classroom. This study will specifically be surveying individuals above the age of 18 that have finished a university (undergraduate or graduate) course within the past 6 months. The university setting was chosen because the goals for higher education are changing and so teaching practices must change as well. The classroom model that we use today is remarkably similar to the ones that were being used 200 years ago during the industrial revolution (Eurich, 1985). The main purpose of education during this time was to train skilled factory workers to keep up with the increasing number of factory jobs. This type of

education was formal, impersonal, inflexible, and logic based because every student was being prepared to go into similar industries. Today, however, post secondary education is not for people who are planning on working in assembly lines but for people whose future requires critical thinking, specialized knowledge, and relational skills. The people who are coming to college today are not all going to end up in the same field and so the same, impersonal and inflexible model of education does not meet the needs of this generation of college students. Therefore, teaching practices must change in order to accommodate the new needs of students and research must be done to discover how these teaching methods relate to student success.

Previous research on this demographic has shown that student learning outcomes are affected primarily by teacher behaviors (Houser & Frymier, 2009). For example, student motivation is affected more by the way that students are taught rather than the actual information covered in classes (Christophel, 1990). This is significant because this study seeks to discover the link between an instructor's communication (the 'how' students are taught) and learner empowerment which is closely related to motivation. This study, therefore, does its part to fill the gap in educational research. It is identifying a teacher behavior that has been historically excluded from the educational model and examining its relationship to a learner outcome.

#### *Instructor Care:*

Care is a concept that all people are familiar with but few have been able to adequately define (Held, 2006). People seem to understand and recognize care when they are engaging in it but have difficulty putting this vast concept into words (Bandura & Lyons, 2012). There are some core aspects to care that most people tend to agree on and include in their definition of care. Care, broadly, is relational, active, and needs based. First of all, care has to do with people

and their relationships to others. Even the new and cliched concept of “self-care” has to do with the relationship that one individual has with themselves. Care also requires effort. While it can occur unconsciously, it is still active. Noddings (1984) states that “care requires some action on behalf of the cared for (p. 10).” Care does not just exist. It is created by people and takes energy. It is also related to needs. The “carer” uses care as a response to their perception of the “cared for’s” needs. Bubeck (2011) argues that care can even take place when the cared for could not meet their own needs without the help of the carer. Sevenhuijsen’s (1998) definition of care accurately sums up the core tenants of this broad and elusive concept as “an ability and a willingness to ‘see’ and to ‘hear’ needs, and to take responsibility for these needs being met” (p. 83). Pedagogical care or instructor care takes this definition and places it in the context of a classroom or learning environment. Instructors are traditionally the carers and the students are the cared for.

Care is instrumental in good teaching because it aids in relationship and community building which aids in learning. In recent years, instructor care and other emotionally based teaching practices have become more important in the university setting. Sutton & Wheatley noticed an “emotional revolution” that took place in the university setting and provided more literature that stressed the importance of the emotional aspect of education on student’s learning and instructor’s teaching experience (2003). This revolution has increased the research that is being done on emotional concepts and in doing so has led us to better understand the importance of care in the university setting. Raser (2013) has identified three categorizations for the way that care has been spoken about in pedagogical communication literature: care through relationships, care through love, and care through humanization.

*Dimensions of Care:*

*Care through Relationships*

Pedagogical and Instructional Communication scholars often speak about pedagogical care in terms of teacher-student relationships and often attribute the role of “carer” to the teacher or instructor and the role of cared for to the student. While most scholars agree that relationships are an important aspect of teaching and are imperative to the communication of care, there are multiple schools of thought as to how messages of care are sent and received within student-teacher relationships and the effect of those (Mehrabian, 1967; Freire, 2003; Noddings, 1984). Some scholars look at (primarily teacher) behaviors that communicate care in these relationships and some look at the whole classroom as a relational community.

When focusing on specific teacher behaviors that communicate care in the classroom, researchers have often turned to immediacy. Immediacy is defined as “communication behaviors that enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another” (Mehrabian, 1967).” It can include verbal communication (i.e. using student’s names, giving praise, etc.) as well as nonverbal communication (i.e. smiling, nodding, proximity, etc.). More simply put, immediacy is characterized by warmth. It has been integral to the study of pedagogical communication because it has been found to improve learning outcomes by increasing learner empowerment (Houser & Frymier, 2009). Furthermore, immediacy has been found to impact perceived teacher credibility and perceived teacher care. Highly immediate teachers are seen as more caring than their less immediate counterparts and are also regarded more highly than them (Christophel, 1990). This could be because immediacy and liking are interconnected and because teachers that are liked are often seen as more caring and teachers that are more caring are often liked more.

Other scholars see the communication of care as a symbiotic responsibility where all parties are simultaneously the “carer” and “cared-for.” Students not only care for their peers but

their teacher as well. The “classroom as community” model is seen as beneficial because it minimizes the competitive aspects of class and allows students to root for their teacher and peer’s success (Rosenberg, 2003). Scholars that study the classroom as a community have identified communication practices that contribute to the shared care. Among these are self-disclosure (Freire, 2003; hooks, 2003; Noddings, 1984), trust among all classroom participants (hooks, 2003), and the recognition of love and humanity within the classroom (Raser, 2013).

When community within a classroom is cultivated, more caring teacher-student relationships can form. These relationships are often characterized as mentoring or friendship relationships. Mentoring relationships are often still characterized by the teacher being in the position of authority or guidance and the student taking the role of the protoge but some researchers are seeking to change that. Calafell argues that mentoring relationships can be reciprocal (2007). Additionally, mentoring relationships, though once seen as strictly professional, are now often personal and emotional. Calafell states that these mentoring relationships can be places of comfort within competitive institutions such as the university (2007). Scholars such as Sutton and Walker are calling for this change saying that sensitivity and empathy are becoming more crucial to the role of faculty if these faculty want to be successful in their teaching (2006). Friendship relationships, on the other hand, are seen as reciprocal and are also crucial to the model of the classroom as community. Even with that, many are still hesitant to endorse teacher-student friendships as beneficial to the educational community. Because of the unequal power dynamic and the history of social and sexual impropriety within the classroom, teacher-student friendships can be perceived as unprofessional, as favoritism, or even as harassment. Other scholars note that educational relationships have always existed and have never been level (hooks, 1994). Some students have closer relationships with teachers than



others and that is how it has always been. The change that must occur here is for these seemingly exclusive teacher-student friendships to become inclusive and reciprocally caring (Raser, 2013).

### *Care through Love*

Care through love is another concept that many are hesitant to endorse in the university setting for many of the same reasons as friendship relationships but also because the university has so long been an institution that valued logic and objectivity over emotional expression (hooks, 1994). There has, however, been a recent interest in pedagogical love which differs from the general society's view of love. Darder states that pedagogical love is inspiring and caring while simultaneously challenging and critically insightful (2009). Other scholars say that creating a safe community where criticism is encouraged and passion is fostered is the act of loving in a classroom (Warren, 2011). Growth through service and healthy criticism are the crux of pedagogical love.

There is overwhelming agreement that pedagogical love is essential in the classroom as it increases student satisfaction and makes learning possible. Similarly to relationships, care through love allows for equality between teachers and students where both are simultaneously cared for and a carer. With love as the center of a classroom, students and teachers alike are able to voice their thoughts and feelings without worrying about judgment. In fact, students cited love and care as two of six good teaching practices that aided their learning and increased their satisfaction with the class (Moore & Kuol, 2007). Beard (2007) found that when emotional expression (love and care included) is integrated into the classroom, student learning increases. Through vulnerable sharing important conversations are started, the classroom becomes a supportive space, and deeper connection is created. Freire writes, "Dialogue cannot exist [. . .] in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people" (2003, p. 89). As universities are

places in which the sharing and critiquing of ideas is paramount, one can assume that the act of caring through love is essential in that space.

### *Care through Humanization*

Care through humanization in the classroom is the mutual affirming and valuing of whole people. In the context of a classroom, humanization is teaching while remembering the human nature of all that are in the classroom, both teacher and student (Tompkins, 1996). Because humanization acknowledges that teacher and student are both human, care through humanization must be mutual. All individuals must humanize all others and therefore take on the role of carer and cared for. Some researchers even include humanization in their definition of care saying that if people are human they are automatically worthy of being cared for (Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996). To care for someone is to acknowledge the value that they have and therefore humanize them. Finally, humanization must not be segmented. Humanizing through teaching recognizes a person's full humanity: mind, body, and spirit (Raser, 2013). Researchers agree that all people in the classroom succeed more when they are treated as whole individuals rather than just a mind or body (hooks, 2003; Tompkins, 1996; O'Brien, 2010). O'Brien simplifies this by saying that caring through humanization means, "caring about who my students are, what they are thinking about, what they want to say, and what they want to do (2010)." Among the literature on care, three methods of humanization have emerged: affirming voices, affirming emotions, and affirming bodies.

Affirming voices is a seemingly simple method of humanization in the context of the classroom but requires immense vulnerability and empathy for all parties. On the surface, affirming students' voices means attentively listening to their stories, interests, opinions, and needs. While this is a good place to start, many believe that teachers must also share their voice

in the classroom (hooks, 2003; Tompkins, 1996). By doing so, students will be able to see their teachers as human thus modeling that teachers and students must be simultaneous carers and cared for. Affirming voices in the classroom can also prove to be difficult for many instructors because it means relinquishing the power and control within a classroom but often proves to be beneficial for creating a classroom community (Cook-Sather, 2020). Finally, as instructors begin respecting student voices and vice versa, students and instructors alike will begin to affirm their own voices and use them more often and more boldly (Cook-Sather, 2020). This creates a domino effect where care through the humanization of voices exponentially increases as people share vulnerably and affirm that in each other.

Emotions are a part of a whole person and have been found to be impactful in the learning process therefore they must be valued. The affirmation of emotions in the classroom can make students “feel what they are learning, and [connect] their knowledge to their personal experience (Raser, 2013).” Additionally, affirming emotions has been found to increase motivation. In the Educational Hall Escape study, researchers found that students that created an emotional bond to their learning had increased motivation and an increased liking of their educational experience (Marcias-Gullen, et. al., 2021). Finally, ignoring or failing to affirm emotions hinders learning (Palmer, 1983). It is an imperative and a caring action for an instructor to make a space for students to share their emotions and vice versa.

Affirming bodies can also prove to be controversial due to the Platonic mind/body split that is often championed in higher education but it doesn't make it any less crucial to the success and care of a classroom. In 2017, 19 percent of students that attended a UC school experienced food insecurity and 5 percent experienced homelessness (FASBN). Those who did respond stated when one basic need was not met, it led to insecurity in other areas (i.e. homelessness impacting

food security.) They also stated that this negatively affected their educational success (Martinez, et. al., 2021). To neglect human bodies in a classroom is a form of socioeconomic prejudice, is irresponsible, and negatively impacts education. Additionally, seeing students as just minds is a great disservice to them and to the classroom because it erases all of their privilege, all of their struggles, and all of the history within a class. Race, gender, sexuality, ableness, socioeconomic status, etc. are all parts of a human being's body. To neglect this would be to neglect the diversity and the growth that comes with it (hooks, 2001). Affirming the body makes ignoring these differences impossible and creates an opportunity for mutual sharing and mutual growth.

*Learner Empowerment:*

Learner empowerment is a crucial area of study for communication scholars because it highly affects educational success and has not been studied adequately. Learner Empowerment is defined as a learner's motivation to perform tasks because he/she finds the tasks meaningful, feels competent to perform them, and feels his/her efforts have an impact in the scheme of things (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996). The more empowered a learner feels the more they learn and vice versa (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996). Learner Empowerment was studied in the field of communication from 1996-2016 but significant research on the topic has slowed down whereas in other disciplines such as psychology and education, research on the topic has increased. While there is much that scholars know about learner empowerment (i.e. dimensions and predictors of it) there is still much that they do not know like how it relates to other pedagogical topics. It is imperative that Learner Empowerment be studied again in the field of communication because there is still so much more to learn and it is crucial to the success of students and teachers. Increasing empowerment in the classroom will increase the quality of a school's education.

Learner empowerment is a motivation based concept characterized by three dimensions: meaningfulness, competence, and impact. Meaningfulness looks at how interesting and valuable a course is, competence measures a learner's perception of their capability to succeed in the course, and impact looks at the degree to which learners feel that they can make a difference in the course. Using these three dimensions, Frymier, Shulman, and Houser created a Learner Empowerment Measure (1996) which has been modified and used for this research. It measures each dimension of learner empowerment and learner empowerment as a whole. Through the use of this scale, past researchers have been able to discover some predictors of learner empowerment.

Learner empowerment is primarily impacted by a student's perceptions of an instructor's communication behavior (Houser & Frymier, 2009). One such characteristic that has been found to impact learner empowerment is teacher immediacy. Teacher Immediacy is defined as "the extent to which the teacher gives off verbal and nonverbal signals of warmth, friendliness, and liking (e.g. forward leans, smiles, purposeful gestures, and eye contact)(Boice, 1996, p. 458)." Before the emergence of learner empowerment as a concept, Christophel found that "students who perceived their teachers as more verbally and nonverbally immediate also reported greater levels of motivation (1990)." Additionally, teacher immediacy was found to increase student engagement in the classroom by peaking student's interest and gaining their attention (Kelley & Gorham, 1988). These preliminary findings helped to inform other studies on learner empowerment specifically.

In more recent studies, immediacy was noted as one of two major predictors of learner empowerment, the other being teacher clarity (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996); Houser & Frymier, 2009). Teacher clarity was found to heavily predict how meaningful students perceive a

class to be and how competent students feel to succeed in the class whereas both teacher clarity and nonverbal immediacy were found to significantly influence the impact that students feel they have on the class (Finn & Schrodt, 2012). Teacher immediacy is a relational instructor behavior whereas teacher clarity is a rhetorical one. It is therefore interesting to note that relational and rhetorical behaviors had different effects on different dimensions of learner empowerment. What must still be discovered is if instructor care has an impact on learner empowerment and if so, which dimensions it primarily affects.

Studies have found that immediacy, clarity, and other teacher behaviors “indirectly affect learning through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes,” such as mediators (Finn & Schrodt, 2012; Frymier & Goldman, 2019). One mediator of learner empowerment is perceived understanding, or how much a student believes their instructor understands them. Perceived understanding can be shown by asking students follow-up questions, summarizing what they have said back to them, and by affirming the emotions that students share in their messages (Finn & Schrodt, 2012). Perceived misunderstanding is communicated by a failure to do the prior and by answering questions incorrectly or not responding to students at all (Finn & Schrodt, 2012). Perceived understanding has been found to be a mediator between instructor clarity and immediacy and learner empowerment (Finn & Schrodt, 2012). When teachers are exhibiting immediacy and/or clarity, students feel understood and their empowerment increases. When the opposite occurs, their empowerment decreases. Therefore, perceived understanding is necessary for immediacy and clarity to have a positive impact on learner empowerment and perceived misunderstanding is a gateway to a negative impact on learner empowerment. What is still unclear is the relationship that instructor care has with learner empowerment. Research has not

been done to examine whether there is a direct relationship, an indirect relationship, or no relationship at all.

This study posits that there will be a positive relationship between perceived instructor care and learner empowerment due to the similar relational component in these two concepts. Highly immediate teachers are seen as more caring than nonimmediate teachers and are generally liked and respected more by their students (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998). This is because liking and immediacy are very similar and often positively affect each other (Mehrabian, 1967). Therefore, instructors who are liked by their students are often seen as more caring and caring instructors are often liked more. (Raser, 2013). According to RRG T, students are more likely to feel motivated to learn when their relational needs are met (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006). Perceiving themselves as cared-for and caring is a relational need that could result in an increase in motivation for students. Because learner empowerment is a motivation based concept it is also likely that an increase in perceived instructor care will lead to an increase in learner empowerment.

RRGT can also help to explain the link between rhetorical and relational behaviors and learner empowerment. If teachers have rhetorical and relational goals and use effective communication behaviors to accomplish those goals, learner outcomes, such as learner empowerment should improve (Finn & Schrodt, 2012). This has been found true for instructor behaviors such as teacher clarity and immediacy but not instructor care. These teacher behaviors have also proved that learner empowerment is affected most by students' perceptions of how instructors communicate in the classroom (Frymier et al., 1996; Houser & Frymier, 2009; Finn & Schrodt, 2012). Therefore, the communication of instructor care in the classroom as a means to accomplish rhetorical and relational goals should have a positive impact on learning outcomes,

namely learner empowerment. Thus in accordance with RRGT and the strong relationship between the concepts of instructor care and learner empowerment to the concept of immediacy I hypothesized the following:

H<sub>1</sub>: As perceptions of instructor care increase among university students, learner empowerment will also increase.

### **Methodology**

#### *Participants:*

This study surveyed 130 individuals above the age of 18 that have finished a university (undergraduate or graduate) course within the past 6 months. These participants were obtained through volunteer sampling on a college campus and through college connections (Davis, Powell, & Lachlan, 2013). To gather participants, emails were sent out to leaders of teaching and learning centers at 43 different colleges in California. They were asked to distribute this survey to their students. Survey distribution began in the latter half of a fall semester and ended early in the following spring with 101 respondents replying in the fall semester and 29 replying in the spring. University students and instructors are the most often researched in the study of pedagogical communication because they are engaged in or are on the receiving end of unique pedagogy. Secondly, because this study is happening at a university, this demographic is the most convenient. Finally, because university students are enrolled in courses that last a minimum of seven weeks, they are able to have more interaction with their instructor and more time to master their coursework. This is imperative for this study because it looks at instructor care, aspects of which require time to develop, and learner empowerment which also takes time to develop. By using university students as a sampling group this study ensures that its participants have



adequate experience to share making the results more reliable than if I had used a different demographic.

The majority of the respondents of this survey came from California Christian Universities (CCUs). The survey has gathered the demographic data of participants (i.e. race, gender, age, and year in school). 42 percent of respondents were non-White and 58 percent were White; 64 percent were female and 34 percent were male; 88 percent were between the ages of 18 and 22; 32 percent were first year students, 10 percent were sophomores, 16 percent were juniors, and 41 percent were seniors. With the exception of year in school, the sample is representative of the population of private CCU's on the west coast. Point Loma Nazarene University's demographics are as follows: 40 percent are non-White and 61 percent are White; 66 percent are female and 34 percent are male; 25 percent are freshman, 22 percent are sophomores, 25 percent are juniors, and 28 percent are seniors (PLNU, 2021). Convenience samples are acceptable if they are representative of the population it is drawn from. (Davis, Powell, & Lachlan, 2013). Additionally, data on the type of class, modality of class, and number of classes taken with a professor was recorded. The survey was approved by the IRB and each participant was asked to give consent to have the data that they provided be published anonymously.

*Materials:*

A survey methodology was used in order to examine the relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment. Students were asked to think of a professor with whom they have completed a course in the last six months. They were then asked to complete a research questionnaire and survey with this professor and their class in mind. The first section of the

survey measured instructor care and the second section measured learner empowerment using the 18 item version of the Learner Empowerment Scale (see Appendix A).

The 15 item instructor care survey was adapted from Raser (2013) however modifications were made to ensure that the reading level was consistent with the sample. To ensure that the survey adequately measured instructor care, questions based on Raser's three dimensions of care were created then reviewed by Raser who made revisions. Those questions were then monitored for reading level and compiled into a likert survey. The final survey contained 5 questions about care through relationships, 4 questions about care through love, and 6 questions about care through humanization. The survey shared a statement and then asked students if they strongly disagreed, disagreed, felt neutral, agreed, or strongly agreed. The instructor care survey as a whole and the three subsets of instructor care were all found to be highly reliable.

After completing the instructor care survey, participants answered questions from the 18 item Learner Empowerment Scale (LES). This survey contained 6 questions on each of the dimensions of learner empowerment: meaningfulness, competence, and impact. The original LES is a 35 item Likert scale (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996) but to prevent participant burnout the 18 item version was used. The 18 item LES is extremely reliable in measuring learner empowerment as a whole and in measuring the three dimensions of learner empowerment. In fact, when looking at the reliability it has almost identical alphas to the 35 item version (Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005). It was concluded that all dimensions of instructor care had a significant relationship with learner empowerment and all dimensions of learner empowerment had a significant relationship with instructor care.

## **Results**

The entire instructor care portion of the survey was found to be highly reliable with each subsection of instructor care also being highly reliable. The subsection of care through relationships achieved an alpha of .848 classifying it as having good internal consistency. The subsection of care through love was found to have an alpha of .9 classifying it as having excellent consistency. The subsection of care through humanization was found to have an alpha of .921 meaning that it also had excellent internal consistency. The average score for instructor care was 4.32 out of 5 with almost 20 percent of students giving their instructors 5 points for almost all care items.

The LES was similarly found to be highly reliable within this sample. Because it was based on the existing 18 item LES internal consistency and reliability were similar to past studies that have used this scale. All subsections had either good or excellent internal consistency. The average score for learner empowerment was 4.06 out of 5.

A positive correlation between instructor care and learner empowerment was found meaning that when instructor care increases, so does learner empowerment and vice versa (see Appendix B). This study did not seek to discover causation because of the internal validity threats that could complicate a study seeking to find causation (Davis, Powell, & Lachlan, 2013). Additionally because of the many different kinds of relationships that can arise between instructor behaviors and student learning outcomes (i.e. causal, direct, indirect or mediating) this study only sought to prove a correlation between the two variables allowing future research to further discover the relationship that exists between these two variables (Frymier & Goldman, 2019).

Using Pearson's R Correlation, I discovered that there was a positive relationship of .675 found between instructor care and learner empowerment which is characterized as a strong

relationship by Losh (2004). It was found to be consistent at  $p < .001$ . Therefore, H1 was confirmed because when instructor care increased, learner empowerment also increased. When controlling for student demographic data and class or institution data, this relationship held its strength. This relationship holds across the sample regardless of type of class, modality, ethnicity, gender. The average respondent had a score of 4.32 out of 5 for instructor care and a score of 4.06 out of 5 for learner empowerment. Therefore it seems that students were more inclined to report on caring instructors rather than uncaring instructors. Nevertheless, the strong positive relationship confirms H1.

### **Discussion**

This study helped to further understand the relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment. Through the creation of an instructor care scale based on Raser's (2013) research and the 18 item Learner Empowerment Scale (see Appendix A), I was able to determine that there was a significant relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment. RRGTT explains that students are more motivated, more satisfied, and more successful when their academic and relational needs are met (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006). Instructor care, as a relational teacher behavior, has the ability to meet both relational and academic needs, one of which being learner empowerment. This study, however, did not seek to discover causation but only sought to understand the hypothesized relationship between the two concepts. Therefore, it is entirely possible that as learners become more empowered, they perceive their instructors to be more caring. When learners have academic needs met, such as learner empowerment, they are more satisfied with their classroom experience which could impact their perception of their instructor's communication and care behaviors.

One limitation to this research is the lack of participants who reported on a class where they perceived the instructor's care and their learner empowerment to be low. The people who wanted to talk about learner empowerment and instructor care were the ones that were experiencing a lot of it. Almost 20% of individuals gave their instructors 5 on almost all care items. With a 4.32 out of 5 for the mean instructor care score and a 4.06 out of 5 for the mean learner empowerment score, we do not get a clear picture of how low levels of learner empowerment and instructor care affect each other. The significant relationship of .675 between the two variables, however, is still considered a strong relationship (Davis, Powell, & Lachlan, 2013).

Another limitation to this research is that it was done primarily on a private, faith based campus. Of the 130 participants, 126 of them reported on a class that they took at a private, faith based university on the west coast of the United States of America. While the results of this study were extremely generalizable (at  $p < .001$ ), they may not be as generalizable for larger, public universities elsewhere as only 4 participants responded from a public university. This lack of diversity within the university type of the sample may present as a limitation, but it also might help us to understand why private, faith based universities have historically championed the instructor student relationships. The respondents from these universities did report exceptionally high levels of instructor care and learner empowerment. That coupled with the extreme pride that many private, faith based universities have on their small class sizes, low faculty to student ratios, and community relations could indicate that instructor care and learner empowerment is a norm for these universities.

Future researchers should replicate this research at public universities and seek to have participants report on a wider experience of classes. One way to do this is to ask students to

report on their first class of the week instead of allowing them to choose any class that they wish. This way, students might not all choose the class that they favor most. This would allow for future research to get a more comprehensive view of the relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment. Future research should also seek to get a larger sample of universities to see if the same relationship holds true at larger public universities. This study could act as a pilot study for the next one that can either seek to expand the knowledge of the relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment or compare and contrast the relationship between private, faith based universities and public, secular universities. Additionally, the next researcher that does this on a larger campus can do this work without worrying about reliability and validity which were both proven to be adequate in this study.

The results of this study are of paramount importance because of the vast impact university instructors have on their students and on society as a whole. 63.3 percent of all individuals above the age of 25 have completed some college courses and therefore have been affected by the results of this study, (US Census Bureau, 2022). These rising numbers are extremely beneficial to the USA because the benefits of a college education, though experienced by the individual, are also experienced by the community in which they participate. Along with the economic benefits of increased tax revenue and decreased reliance on government financial support, higher education reduces crime rates, increases social cohesion, and increases the quality of civic life as a whole. Additionally, access to a college education can bring generational change by breaking the cycle of poverty (Fairweather & Hodges, 2006). Higher education is integral to the success of a community in both the present and the future. Because of these large implications, our university instructors must be well equipped to keep students engaged so that they can succeed both within and outside of the classroom. Therefore, teaching behaviors such as

the communication of care, that can accomplish a student's rhetorical and relational goals, should not be left to chance. This study must be used to educate instructors on the importance of their communication of care and in conjunction with other studies that will educate them on how best to communicate their care (Raser, 2013; Bandura & Lyons, 2012; Noddings, 1984; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996).

Additionally, universities are changing and need guidance in that change. They were originally intended to make good industrial workers, but as factory jobs are being outsourced (Eurich, 1985) the goal of the university has shifted and its teaching methods must also shift. Where there was originally no space for care in the classroom model, this study and many others have shown that there is a great need for it if we want our students to succeed (Raser, 2013; Frymier & Goldman, 2019; Houser & Frymier, 2009). As a whole, universities are doing their best to corporately make this change. They have implemented student development and wellness programs, they have lowered class sizes, and they have included community engagement opportunities to show care for their students. Where they fall short is in the training of their educators. They do not put as much time, effort, or resources into ensuring that their instructors are caring in the classroom. The UC budget for 2021-22 operations budgets states that they set aside 30 million dollars on focused investments to improve student outcomes but none of that money went toward faculty care training. The results of this study prove that there is a relationship between perceived instructor care and learner empowerment so therefore if universities want their students to feel empowered, they must train their instructors to care for their students.

Finally, this study is integral to the implementation of care in the university setting because it quantitatively measures care. Most studies on care have been conducted using various

qualitative methods of measurement (Raser, 2013; O'Brien, 2010; Cook-Sather, 2020). While qualitative studies are helpful to understanding care, they do not offer a large enough sample size to make their findings significantly generalizable and they are often seen as more subjective because of their reliance on data interpretation (Davis, Powell, & Lachlan, 2013). Some that have sought to quantitatively study care measured immediacy and then linked it to care, but few have found a way to measure care quantitatively because there was no existing care scale. This study is the first to have used the instructor care scale based on the research of Raser (2013). Because the scale was found to be so reliable and valid, this study more accurately and objectively generalizes the relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment in the university setting. This study could also serve as the pilot study for the development of a certified instructor care scale and could inform and inspire other studies that seek to quantify care. While this study is the first of its kind, it should certainly not be the last. There is so much more to discover now that there is an existing scale that quantitatively measures instructor care.

In conclusion, this study filled a gap in the research because instructor care has been studied but never quantitatively and recent learner empowerment research in the field of communication was lacking. Additionally these two concepts had never been studied together but in doing so, we were able to find that there was a significant relationship between instructor care and learner empowerment in the context of the university classroom. As universities continue to impact communities it is essential that we find ways to maximize their effectiveness. Therefore studies should continue examining the instructor care and its relationship to learner empowerment in different types of universities and should begin to study it quantitatively now that there is an existing scale to do so.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Instructor Care and Learner Empowerment Survey

#### Section 1:

#### Informed Consent to Participate in Research

**Introduction/Purpose:** I understand that I am being invited to participate in a research study. **HON 4099/Honors Project** is sponsoring this study at Point Loma Nazarene University. **The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between perceived instructor care and student learner empowerment.**

**Procedures:** I understand that the proposed length of my participation in this study consists of **approximately 15 minutes**. During this time, I will **think of a professor that I have taken a class from in the past 6 months and answer a 41 question survey.**

**Risks:** There are no more than minimal risks (what one would encounter in daily life) associated with this study.

**Benefits:** The benefit of participating in this project is helping the researchers understand more about our topic of study as well as increase self-awareness.

**Voluntary Participation:** I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Confidentiality:** I understand that the data collected for this study and/or any identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office. I understand that all data collected will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name), that my name will not be used. I further understand that the results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

**Debriefing:** I understand that I have the right to have all questions about the study answered in sufficient detail for me to clearly understand the level of my participation as well as the significance of the research. I understand that at the completion of this study, I will have an opportunity to ask and have answered all questions pertaining to my involvement in this study by contacting **Annika Wong** at [annikawong523@pointloma.edu](mailto:annikawong523@pointloma.edu) after the study is complete, around **May 2nd, 2022**.

**Receipt of informed consent:** I acknowledge that I may call the investigators involved in the study, or supervising professor, **Dr. Jeff Birdsell**, in order to discuss confidentiality of any questions about participation in the study. Also, should I have any concerns about the nature of

this study I can also contact the Chair of PLNU's IRB ([IRB@pointloma.edu](mailto:IRB@pointloma.edu)).

**Acknowledgement of Consent:** By participating in this study, I provide my consent and I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.

**Contact Information**

**Investigator:**

**Annika Wong**

[annikawong523@pointloma.edu](mailto:annikawong523@pointloma.edu) / (808) 234-3567

**Supervising Professor:**

**Dr. Jeff Birdsell**

[jebirdse@pointloma.edu](mailto:jebirdse@pointloma.edu) / (619) 849-3370

**Section 2:**

For this survey, think about a college instructor with whom you have completed a course in the last 6 months. Use your experience with them and the class you took with them to answer the following questions.

1. What was the instructor's name?
  - a. (Type in textbox)
2. Including this class, how many classes have you taken with this instructor?
  - a. (Type in textbox)
3. Was this class required for your major/minor, a GE/university requirement, or an elective?
  - a. Major/minor
  - b. GE/university requirement
  - c. Elective
4. Was the class online, in person, or hybrid?
  - a. In person
  - b. Hybrid (a course in which a portion of face to face learning was replaced with web-based online learning)
  - c. Online
5. Where was this class taken?
  - a. PLNU
  - b. Other (Type in textbox)

**Section 3:**

Please respond to the statements in terms of the class you have taken and the instructor that taught it. Visualize the class and the instructor. Please use the following scale to respond to each

of the following statements.

Strongly Disagree = 1      Disagree = 2      Neutral = 3      Agree = 4  
Strongly Agree = 5

1. (Instructor name) communicates warmly
2. (Instructor name) wants to get to know me
3. (Instructor name) cares about what I am passionate about
4. (Instructor name) respects me
5. (Instructor name) supports me
6. (Instructor name) is interested in hearing about my life
7. (Instructor name) is interested in hearing about my opinions
8. (Instructor name) values my contribution to the classroom
9. (Instructor name) shares about his/her life
10. (Instructor name) encourages the processing of emotions in this class
11. (Instructor name) cares about the physical needs of the class
12. My classroom is a safe environment for me
13. The class feels like a community
14. I trust (Instructor name)
15. I want to have a relationship with (Instructor name) even after the class ends

#### Section 4:

Please respond to the statements in terms of the class you have taken. Visualize the class situation or and rate how frequently you felt the following in (Instructor name)'s class. Please use the following scale to respond to each of the following statements.

Never = 1      Rarely = 2      Occasionally = 3      Often = 4      Very Often = 5

1. I have the power to make a difference in how things are done in this class.
2. My participation is important to the success of this class.
3. I can help others learn in this class.
4. I can't influence what happens in this class.
5. My participation in this class makes no difference.
6. I can influence the (Instructor name) .
7. The work that I do in this class is meaningful to me.
8. The work that I do for this class is valuable to me.
9. The things I learn in this class are useful.
10. This class will help me achieve my goals in life.
11. The work I do in this class is a waste of my time.
12. This class is not important to me.
13. I can do well in this class



14. I don't think that i can do the work in this class
15. I believe in my ability to do well in this class
16. I have what it takes to do well in this class
17. I don't have the confidence in my ability to do well in this class.
18. I feel very competent in this class.

### Section 5:

1. Age in years:
  - a. (Type in text box)
2. What is your gender?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Prefer not to say
3. What is your year in school?
  - a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
4. What is your ethnicity?
  - a. Native American or American Indian/Alaska Native
  - b. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - c. Hispanic or Latino
  - d. Black or African American
  - e. White
  - f. Other (Please specify)
  - g. Prefer not to say

## Appendix B: The Correlation Between Instructor Care and Learner Empowerment

	Correlations			
	Instructor care average	IC-relationships	IC-love	IC-humanization
Learner empowerment average	.675**	.670**	.615**	.638**
LE-impact	.576**	.563**	.500**	.560**
LE-meaning	.661**	.680**	.644**	.583**
LE-competence	.543**	.430**	.385**	.460**

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed).

