

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

A Care Ethics Approach to Digital Literacies: Supporting Language Acquisition, Identity, and Overall Well-being of Adult EAL Learners with Refugee Experiences in Canada

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Abstract

Academics around the globe have examined the ethics of care theory and its application across various educational contexts; however, little research has focused on this approach within the adult English as an additional language (EAL) context. Additionally, educational research on digital literacies has examined the competencies necessary to be *digitally literate* today, yet only recently has research in EAL contexts shed light on the digital needs and goals of adult newcomers with refugee status in Canada. This review provides insight into the pairing of a care ethics approach with digital literacies instruction for learners with refugee experiences in the EAL classroom. Through current research and classroom practices, I argue that this approach can support language acquisition, identity, and overall well-being for this growing population of adult learners in Canada. Synthesizing research on a care ethics approach in education and the digital literacy needs and goals of adult English language learners, the first section focuses on the role of a care ethics approach in EAL contexts. The second section discusses the digital landscape in Canada and summarizes research on digital literacy practices in EAL contexts. The final section brings forth the discussion, strategies, and implications of integrating a caring, empathetic, and inclusive approach to digital literacies.

Introduction

Canada is home to an increasing population of adult newcomers with refugee status who are resettling their families and working hard to start their journey in a new country. Along with finding work and caring for their families, these adults are faced with the challenges of enrolling into English as an additional (EAL) language programs through either federally or provincially funded organizations (Khatri, 2016). The transition into an academic setting combined with many other responsibilities can be extremely stressful, as newcomers with refugee experiences may have had interrupted or very little experience within formal school settings (Barber, 2021). The work of Nel Noddings (2012) and the ethics of care theory for education has emphasized the role of caring for students through classroom approaches that support learner needs, foster relationships, and enhance learner well-being. Current research with adult learners with refugee status has identified these classroom experiences as critical aspects to the overall care and sense of inclusiveness these EAL learners have expressed during their resettlement (Barber, 2021; Finley, 2018). Addressing the diverse needs of learners with refugee experiences during resettlement requires a holistic approach, and an ethics of care has the potential to transform EAL classrooms into safe and supportive environments for individuals who have experienced forced displacement or trauma in their lives (Barber, 2021; Khatri, 2016).

In addition, to fully participate and contribute to life in Canada, there is an increased need to possess technology skills and knowledge; therefore, digital literacies training within EAL programming is essential for newly arriving adult learners. Digital technologies impact all aspects of people's daily experiences, and adult learners must be able to make use of digital technologies to find work, enrol in school, and attend to a multitude of daily activities. Tour et al. (2022) highlighted these digital practices as essential elements to the settlement and wellbeing of adult learners with refugee experiences. Rabin and Smith (2013) argued that digital literacies in education should integrate learners' prior knowledge along with their current needs, with an emphasis on building relationships, trust, and community within the classroom. Moreover, teachers in adult EAL classrooms need support within their teaching and learning contexts to build the knowledge and skills for practising this relational care. With this at the forefront, the following questions guided the research for this literature review:

1. How can a care ethics approach to digital literacies for adult English language learners with refugee experiences promote language proficiency and learner identity?
2. How does a care ethics approach affect the overall well-being of adult newcomers with refugee status in Canada?

The following sections explore current literature related to care ethics and digital literacies within adult education and EAL settings. Through the pairing of a care ethics approach with digital literacies, I focus on providing information and practical applications for educators to consider within their own teaching and learning contexts when supporting adult learners with refugee experiences.

Methods

This literature review aims to examine the relationship between a care ethics approach and the integration of digital literacies within adult EAL teaching and learning contexts. To examine their relationship and find current peer-reviewed research, Google Scholar and the University of Calgary database were used. The keywords used in the search included ethics of care in education, digital literacy, adult EAL education, English language learners, language acquisition, refugees, EAL identity, and well-being. Most articles examined care ethics or digital literacies, but rarely a combination of the two. In addition, the majority focused on education in the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia, and many related to K–12 EAL students, with few referencing EAL contexts in Canada or adult learners.

To compile the literature for this review, qualitative studies relating to the key word search were gathered, initially examined, and sorted thematically. The use of qualitative data draws upon Suri's (2019) discussion of theological ethics, as it "takes into account subjective experiences and perceptions of diverse groups" in order to provide a holistic view of the research (p. 43). The articles were compiled in Zotero, and common themes that appeared from their abstracts were used to initially sort them. Articles were then analyzed and synthesized to bring forth the main themes identified in the discussion.

Literature Review

Ethics of Care in Education

A care ethics approach in EAL education has primarily examined teacher relationships with children and youth in K–12 settings. However, care ethics research to better understand the role that caring classroom relations have for the growing population of adult learners in host countries where the common day-to-day language is English has recently been increasing in adult education contexts (Barber; 2024; Finley, 2018; Hunter, 2024 Schwab, 2019). The ethics of care theory is an approach to build trusting and safe relationships between educators and learners. Tronto's (1993, 2013) work in care ethics defined the phases for caring relations to include recognizing the need for care, being accountable to respond to the identified needs, having knowledge and skills to address needs, communicating with individuals to understand if their needs have been met, and taking responsibility in society to collectively receive and give care. Noddings' (2012) research on care ethics expanded the definition of care to encompass not only caring *about* learners, but to genuinely caring *for* them.

The ethics of care fits well within EAL education because the caring relationships that are built within the classroom can be catalysts for the overall care and sense of well-being that adult newcomers may experience during their resettlement (Barber, 2021). Rooted in feminist theory, the ethics of care approach in education should not only include providing care and comfort but should further improve the lives of those educators care for and propel learners to reciprocate and contribute to caring relations (Noddings, 2012; Rabin, 2023). In addition, this feminist ethical lens focuses on the importance of social relationships and the responsibility that all participants have in building these relationships. In the classroom, this lens translates into caring for and with students to “increase their sense of comfort in learning spaces” (Sykes & Gachaco, 2018, p. 88). EAL educators, therefore, have a responsibility to provide a welcoming and trusting environment for adult learners to navigate the complexities of a new language, identity, and culture. English language classrooms are often the main source of interaction and community that newly arriving adults with refugee status experience; therefore, the connections with others and the sense of inclusiveness inside of the classroom can be a positive influence on their overall adjustment and success in Canada.

Although teachers may strive to build their lessons towards the needs and goals of their learners, the reality is they are often bound by the curriculum and outcomes prescribed by the language programs they are a part of. Finding balance between curricular needs and learners' unique needs and interests requires time and attention on the part of instructors, leadership, and curriculum developers (Schwab, 2019). There should, however, still be a focus on integrating students' interests and needs within the classroom, and instructors should have the freedom and capacity to create these learning opportunities within their classrooms. Current research has shown how identity growth and well-being are nurtured in caring and inclusive classroom practices (Barber, 2021; Sykes & Gachaco, 2018; Tour et al., 2023).

When educators acknowledge and show care for the experiences and knowledge that adult learners bring to the classroom, learners' motivation and engagement increases. Huang (2024) has suggested incorporating classroom activities that allow learners to share their

identities and unique lived experiences, while also allowing for opportunities to make use of learners' first languages. Making use of other known languages as a support to language development can benefit a learner's ability to understand concepts, build relationships, and support identity growth (Huang, 2024; Hunter, 2024). Furthermore, in sharing differences and similarities in languages, educators are acknowledging the knowledge and validity of other languages and moving away from a view of English as being superior (Hunter, 2024). Through these acts of language and knowledge sharing, the classroom community becomes a supportive environment where stories of past, present, and future identities are a part of the language learning journey. Considering the care ethics lens, it is also imperative that adult learners have equitable access to education technologies and opportunities to engage with digital tools to support their language acquisition, identity growth, and settlement needs in Canada.

Digital Literacy Skills and Practice

Digital technologies are integrated into all aspects of modern society and having access and ability to make use of various technologies greatly impacts the settlement experiences of newly arriving learners with refugee experiences. Having the skills and ability to connect with others and perform daily tasks plays a key role in building confidence and independence for adults with refugee experiences (Huang, 2024; Tour et al., 2023). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic forced education online, leaving many EAL educators struggling to find ways to support the language acquisition and digital literacy skills of adult learners who had little to no experience with online learning and digital technologies. This highlighted the need to integrate digital literacies with language development to support future generations of newly arriving adult learners in Canada.

The term digital literacies has encompassed a variety of different definitions and continues to be difficult to define. Pongrazio et al. (2020) conducted a comparative review to examine the definitions and applications of digital literacies across three different language speaking contexts and revealed that tensions exist between defining literacy as either a "cognitive process or a social practice" (p. 454). These tensions further exist in classroom practices and influence how digital literacies are viewed and taught. Researchers and educators have questioned whether a focus on building functional skills and knowledge or a focus on everyday practices and connections to prior knowledge are more effective strategies. Pongrazio et al.'s (2020) research revealed that learners were most productively engaged in digital literacies when a sociocultural approach was adopted, which integrated cultural and contextual practices with learners existing strengths and abilities.

Huang (2024) examined the digital literacy skills and needs of Syrian learners with refugee experiences in relation to their resettlement journeys. Drawing from the research literature and the her own research with these learners in Canada, Huang (2024) emphasized the role of lived experience and learner strengths to scaffold learning during classroom lessons. Although not a digital task, a story-telling lesson proved meaningful for adult learners, as it provided opportunities for language production alongside the sharing of individual experiences, values, and goals (Huang, 2024). In focusing on expressed needs, educators must first listen to their learners and support their motivations and engagements throughout the learning process. Huang's (2024) research revealed that many of the learners interviewed were adept users of their mobile phones and frequently accessed a variety of apps and social platforms. By leveraging the

accessibility and familiarity of mobile devices in the classroom, learners may feel more confident in their digital learning experiences. Similarly, Nauman's (2021) research study on the digital literacy needs of refugees in Canada revealed participants' priorities for using digital technologies were focused towards building their communication skills and gaining independence. When learners were asked what computer/mobile/technology skills were most important to learn, the highest scored skill was "becoming self-reliant and confident in myself as I navigate a new country," and next was "improving my communication skills in English"; whereas, learning computer applications, software, and typing skills ranked lower on their desired skills (Nauman, 2021, p. 59). This ability to be self-reliant when using technologies has also been shown to improve learners' well-being and sense of inclusion within the wider society (Andrade & Doolin, 2016).

As many adults with refugee experiences are learning digital literacies alongside language acquisition, EAL educators must find ways to provide meaningful opportunities that combine these skills through classroom strategies and activities. Noddings (2012) discussed a caring approach which focuses on learners "expressed needs" (p. 772) rather than the "assumed needs" (p. 773) of the institution. By taking the time to understand the diverse experiences and needs of students, this approach can help empower learners as the focus shifts from learners' deficits towards their strengths (Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016).

When working with EAL learners, it can be challenging to move away from focusing on what learners lack rather than what they already bring to the language classroom. The movement away from the deficit model of teaching has had educators and researchers examine alternative approaches that build confidence and motivation for adult learners. Focusing on the digital literacy needs of adult migrant and refugee learners in Australia, Tour et al. (2023) have suggested a strength-based approach to empower adult learners' problem-solving skills and agency within a supportive classroom community. Huang (2024) further noted that learners with refugee experiences were familiar with a variety of digital technologies and made use of them regularly in their daily lives. To build upon their prior knowledge and strengths, incorporating digital projects and multimodal pedagogies "help[ed] learners deal with real-life situations stemming from their migration experience or their current integration challenges" (p. 223).

Within the EAL classroom, current research has revealed that digital literacies should empower learners to engage with digital tools to support their unique needs, build social connections, and promote an "ongoing sense of agency" (Tour et al., 2023, p. 15). Furthermore, learners need more opportunities to make use of their multimodal resources and build upon their prior knowledge and strengths. This approach can further enhance motivation and overall well-being of adult learners.

Discussion and Implications

To examine a care ethics approach to digital literacy in EAL education, qualitative studies that have focused on the integration of digital resources within EAL contexts have informed this review. When a care ethics approach is applied to this research, several key strategies and approaches can be highlighted for supporting adults with refugee experiences in their language, digital literacies, and settlement journeys. The subsequent sections highlight strategies of a care

ethics approach to digital literacies and discuss the implications these have for students, instructors, and leadership.

Digital Storytelling for Caring Communities

Current research on digital storytelling in EAL teaching and learning underscores its ability to create connections, share experiences, and foster empathy in an inclusive learning environment (Castañeda, 2018; Lenette et al., 2019). By incorporating digital projects, such as digital storytelling, learners can share their unique and diverse experiences with one another. Sykes and Gachaco (2018) discussed an ethics of care practice through the idea of “safe-ish spaces” (p. 86), where educators and students co-create an agreement at the start of course which focuses on respectful classroom behaviour and how to support, care for, and build trust together. Creating this type of contract and negotiation between all group members can “de-centre the lecturer as the person solely responsible for care” and promote a shared responsibility for building safe and caring relationships (Sykes & Gachaco, 2018, p. 93). Li and Pham (2022) further supported the idea of communication and collaboration in classroom digital projects and discussed choosing a platform that enables students to collaborate and provide feedback to one another throughout the learning process. When learners are engaged in digital storytelling projects, they are acquiring language and digital skills, enabling self-expression, and sharing their identity through multi-modal representation. It is important to note that educators also require care and support in implementing digital technologies into their teaching contexts to align with their own values and to provide meaningful and creative learning opportunities for their students (Pischetola, 2021). With these strategies and classroom practices, technology implementation brings focus towards care, inclusivity, and responsibility among all individuals within the classroom.

Empowering With a Strengths-Based Approach

As discussed by Hunter (2024), focusing on learner needs and prior knowledge can guide instructors in scaffolding digital activities and learning. In conjunction with focusing on prior knowledge, a strengths-based approach to digital literacy can change instructor perceptions of *digital helplessness* towards empowering and building confidence in skills and abilities. Moreover, a strengths-based approach can allow learners to share their knowledge and skills with other students in the classroom, which encourages collaboration, teamwork and student-centred learning. In online learning environments and flipped classrooms, a focus on building community and discussion amongst students is important for learners to feel cared about. Hunter (2024) suggested grouping learners with common interests, allowing learners choice in how they contribute (be it video, typing, or audio), and providing timely feedback to learners to show care and consideration for all students. When these approaches are recognized and applied in the EAL context, instructors are supporting language acquisition, identity, and overall well-being of adult learners.

Translanguaging and Multimodality

The field of English language education is seeking a new direction for teaching that prioritizes and strives to better understand “those that experience social injustice and exclusion (Hunter,

2024, p.1). Issues of power and equity are ever present in educational institutions, yet many are making it a priority to shift the power in their classrooms and honour the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Within EAL classrooms, a student-centred approach shifts the power from the teacher to allow for learners to be engaged in learning tasks with one another, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. EAL curriculum has also historically been geared to teach a uniform *native speaker* language model for successful integration into the dominant culture (Schwab, 2019). EAL education is shifting away from this language model to embrace the assets that diverse multilingual learners bring to their new countries. In finding new approaches to teaching, an ethics of care approach places value in learners' abilities to make use of "all linguistic and non-linguistic resources when making meaning" (Hunter, 2024, p. 9).

Bozalek et al. (2020) asserted that care ethics in relation to educational technology involves recognizing the complex relationships in education that occur between students, educators, technology, and the environment. Furthermore, they noted the power hierarchies within the classroom and the necessary shift away from the common native speaker stance of English language education, encouraging diversity of voice. Through projects that focus on multi-modality, learners can express themselves and build meaning through the combination of various modalities, such as language, image, and sound (New London Group, 1996). When integrating technology and introducing different approaches in the classroom that blur the lines between teacher and student, educators can move towards a "more caring conceptualization of language and education" (Hunter, 2024, p.14). By bringing this caring approach into the classroom community, educators can work towards raising up the voices and identities of this diverse population to empower them as equals within the cultural landscape of Canada. Borrowing from Ippolito (2021), educators must empower learners and look at what they bring to the table rather than viewing their "first languages [as] barriers to be overcome in the second language learning process" (p. 249).

Involving Stakeholders

Tour et al. (2022) discussed the experiences of migrant and refugee adult English language learners in a community-based program in Australia. Tour et al. focused on the integration of digital literacies practices and the impact these practices had on students, teachers, and leadership in an educational setting. Tour et al. have brought to light the role of feminist pedagogies within adult education and the how the teaching practices at this centre "were informed by care and empathy for vulnerable and often traumatized learners" (p.55). Through this thoughtful and caring approach to teaching migrant and refugee women, leadership at the language school where the study took place supported the efforts of their faculty in the implementation of new approaches to digital literacies and strived to provide a safe and caring space for adult learners. Tour et al. noted that the strengths-based approaches for teaching must first come from the personal strengths, abilities, and interests of the teachers. Furthermore, these personal skills must be acknowledged and valued by leadership to enable further development and educational change. Caring leadership places value on the teaching and learning experiences and the success of all learners, which ultimately contributes to a culture of care for everyone.

Instructor Care

As EAL educators continuously work to build inclusive and caring communities within their classrooms, it is important to remember that care begins within oneself. EAL educators working with learners who have experienced trauma may also experience negative effects on their mental health along with physical and emotional exhaustion because of their empathic relations with students and their exposure to traumatic stories (Crossman, 2023). Crossman (2023) noted many instructors report that learning to set boundaries to maintain their well-being often comes through trial and error. There is a need for more focus on trauma-informed practice for pre-service teachers as well as opportunities for in-service professional development to further expand strategies for maintaining boundaries with students. Teacher education programs and professional development should continue to bring focus to the importance of nurturing instructors' well-being alongside the well-being of their students. Tour et al. (2022) noted that instructors often view themselves as having deficits rather than strengths for supporting the digital literacies of their students. More work needs to be done to empower educators in their practices and to provide opportunities to develop skills and share individual strengths and knowledge.

Future Research

Future research in care ethics and digital literacies should continue to explore the needs and digital practices of learners with refugee experiences throughout their resettlement journey. Tour et al. (2022) have suggested professional development opportunities for EAL teachers to shift their thinking from “technologies as tools” towards “technologies as social practices” (p. 166). Additionally, exploring the various strategies and educator/learner perceptions of a caring approach to digital projects and online learning environments could further enhance classroom practices (Hedayati-Mehdiabadi & Gunawardena, 2023). Finally, research should continue to examine the effectiveness of translanguaging and multiliteracy practices for adult digital literacies and language acquisition. Future research and guidance in these areas could strengthen the teaching and learning environment and the caring approach to digital literacies within adult English language classrooms.

Conclusion

An exploration of the intersection of care ethics and digital literacies for adult learners with refugee experiences offers rich insights for EAL education. It highlights the importance of fostering caring, inclusive, and participatory approaches when building digital literacies with adult EAL learners. Drawing from principles of care ethics outlined by Tronto (1993, 2013) and Noddings (2012), the research explored in this literature review emphasizes a focus on caring and strengths-based practices that acknowledge refugee experiences and empower adult learners to build upon their existing languages, identities, and diverse skills (Tour et al., 2022). Acknowledging and honouring the lived experiences and multiple literacies of adult learners with refugee experiences can further support language, identity, and overall well-being.

In addition, caring for the needs of students also requires that school communities acknowledge the need to care for the well-being of educators. To do good work for others,

educators must first do good work for themselves by prioritizing their own care. Leadership support and professional development opportunities for educators are crucial for nurturing caring classroom communities and promoting teacher well-being. As EAL education in Canada moves forward, educational programs, leaders, and educators should continue to explore the intersections between care ethics and digital literacies, as well as the effectiveness of translanguaging and multiliteracy practices in adult language education. Through this work and the fostering of caring relationships in education, adult EAL educators can continue to enhance their understanding of how to best support the diverse needs of adult EAL learners with refugee experiences in an increasingly digital world.

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