

6-2021

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Recommended Citation

Morin, L. (2021). The First-Year Library Instruction One-Shot: A Place for Caring. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 15 (1), 95–103. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2021.15.1.5>

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The First-Year Library Instruction One-Shot: A Place for Caring

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Abstract

An academic librarian providing one-shot instruction sessions to first-year students is uniquely positioned to enact a feminist ethic of care in the classroom. First-year university students are particularly in need of caring. The library instruction session is often their introduction to and first impression of the library and an opportunity to inspire a relationship with the librarian and library. The instruction session, then, should be seen as an open door to a future relationship between librarian and student. The librarian is not the professor and, therefore, has the freedom to focus a primary learning objective on caring.

Keywords: care ethics, feminist care ethics, first-year students, library instruction, one-shot

Perspectives edited by Stewart Brower

Morin, L. (2021). The first-year library instruction one-shot: A place for caring.
Communications in Information Literacy, 15(1), 95–103.

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The First-Year Library Instruction One-Shot: A Place for Caring

An academic librarian providing one-shot instruction sessions to first-year students is uniquely positioned to enact a feminist ethic of care in the classroom. First-year university students are particularly in need of caring. The library instruction session is often their introduction to and first impression of the library and an opportunity to inspire a relationship with the librarian and library. The instruction session, then, should be seen as an open door to a future relationship between librarian and student. The librarian is not the professor and, therefore, has the freedom to focus a primary learning objective on caring.

First-Year Students and the Nature of the One-Shot

As a child in a segregated school system, bell hooks felt cared for by teachers that had also taught her parents, aunts, and uncles, and who knew (and took the time to know) about her family and life outside the classroom. She said, “My effort and ability to learn was always contextualized within the framework of generational family experience. Certain behaviors, gestures, habits of being were traced back” (hooks, 1994, p. 3). Nel Noddings (2012) advocated that an ideal caring school environment is one that keeps teachers and students together for years, by mutual consent, in a continuum of care that allows deep knowing of each other. Students need to know someone cares for them as persons so that in low moments, they will continue to work out of trust and love for their teacher, until better moments come along (Noddings, 2012). As library instructors, we do not have generations, or years, or semesters. When we are lucky, we have 110 minutes. One of the common ways first-year students are introduced to their campus library is via a one-time library introduction and information literacy session, often referred to as a “one-shot.” The session could be part of a first-year experience seminar designed to introduce students to campus life or part of the curriculum of a first-year composition course (Boyd-Byrnes & McDermott, 2007). Typically, it is at the discretion of the course instructor whether they integrate the library visit into their syllabus. For a librarian then, the opportunity to impact first-year students is very often restricted to these less-than-ideal one-shot sessions.

Is it completely impossible to impart caring in a one-shot library session? No, not if we think of these minutes as the beginning of a librarian-student relationship and not a closed circle. There are ways to demonstrate love and caring in this environment, and it is

especially important to do so with our first-year students. They are often leaving home for the first time, separating from their family and friends, forced to quickly adjust to the academic life and the demands of faculty, and make new friends; all sources of stress that have been shown to negatively impact students' abilities to adjust to higher education (O'Keeffe, 2013). Particularly at risk are first-generation college students, those for whom neither parent has achieved a baccalaureate degree. First-generation college students come from families that lack experience with the transition to college life; they often look to teachers as their primary source of help to solve both course-related and personal problems (Wang, 2014). Studies have shown that a sense of connectedness and feeling cared for can have dramatic impact on student retention rates and ensuring that students perform to the best of their abilities; that sense of connectedness can come from a caring relationship with just one key person in the student's institution (O'Keeffe, 2013).

Feminist Pedagogy and the Ethic of Care

Before we home in on the ethic of care, let us zoom out to the wider lens of feminist pedagogy in which classroom relational care ethics is situated. Feminist pedagogy is marked by desire to break down the classroom hierarchy that traditionally puts the teacher in a position of power over the students, favoring instead an egalitarian community of learners who respect individuals and differences (Crabtree et al., 2009, p. 5). It emphasizes the epistemological validity of personal experience and acknowledges personal, communal, and subjective ways of knowing (Crabtree et al., 2009, p. 4). Instructors seek to foster open discussion and critical inquiry; their classrooms are highly participatory and engaging environments where students are encouraged to learn actively and work cooperatively (Ladenson, 2010, p. 106). In practice, this looks like a teacher otherwise situated than at the front of the room, sharing rather than demanding authority and asking more questions than answering (Accardi, 2013, p. 43). Students are encouraged to be leaders; their input valued and validated. This teacher may begin by asking, "What should we learn today?" In this way, feminist pedagogy is, therefore, concerned as much for *how* and *why* instruction occurs as with *what* is taught/learned.

A teacher engaging with feminist pedagogy sincerely feels concern for their students, demonstrated by treating them as individuals, understanding their desire for knowledge that is meaningful, guiding them in making connections between what they are learning and their overall life experiences, and having as much concern for their personal growth as their

academic achievements (Crabtree et al., 2009; hooks, 1994). Here, then, we narrow back in to the ethic of care, first discussed by Carol Gilligan in her 1982 work, *In A Different Voice*. Citing the example of a physician who did not just treat her patient but sat by her bedside with a root-beer float so she would not be alone, Gilligan posited that the "ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection," (p. 62). bell hooks (1994) positioned this relational ethic of care in the classroom, famously beginning *Teaching to Transgress* by imploring instructors to "teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students" (p. 13). She identified the classroom as the "most radical space of possibility in the academy" (hooks, 1994, p. 12). Maria T. Accardi (2013) noted that the library classroom may be the place with the most radical possibilities of all: "the marginal status of librarians gives us more freedom to experiment with our pedagogy than regular teaching faculty have...it is in the margins that we ironically have more freedom" (p. 69). Here then, in the library classroom (yes, even in the format of a one-shot!) is the place to demonstrate caring, particularly with our vulnerable first-year students.

Nel Noddings gave us the formula for a caring relation to take place; it is clearly enacted between two people: the carer (in this case, the teacher) and the cared-for (student). "A caring relation is, in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings" (Noddings, 2005, p. 15). For this reason, it has been argued that an appropriate fit for a caring relation to take place in the library is in a one-on-one reference consultation (Bruce, 2020) or during an involved encounter at the Reference Desk (Ladenson, 2017). However, if we view the library one-shot as something other than a beginning, middle, and end of itself (a closed circle), and think of it instead as the onset of a caring relationship with individual students, we can situate the ethic of care solidly within. Noddings (2012) pointed out that the caring relation takes place when, first, the carer is attentive to the expressed (not assumed) needs of the cared-for. Next, the carer's motive energy begins to move toward the cared-for: listening, reflecting, and then responding, positively if possible, but if not, at least in a way that maintains the caring relation. Lastly, the care must be received by the cared-for. In the library instruction one-shot for first-year university students, it is possible to carry out these steps in some cases, but primarily we can cultivate the caring environment to set the stage for deeper caring relations to take place in future meetings.

Ethic of Care in the Library Classroom

In the author's experience, nearly half of the students arriving for their library instruction one-shot admit to being in the library for the first time that day; this is an opportunity for a caring first impression. Keeping in mind feminist pedagogy ideals, the author-as-teacher wants to be seen as their equal, not an authority, in the learning experience that will occur that day. As much as possible then, the teacher positions herself other than at the front of the room, lecturing. They know the teacher's name (through introductions and wearing a nametag), so the teacher asks them to write their names on place cards at their seats—even though we have just a short time together, the students should not feel they are anonymous. Sometimes the class is small enough to learn more about each student, even something as basic as their major, or the topic they are researching. Because most often they are in the library to research a specific assignment, the teacher is tasked to find a balance between teaching to the assignment, familiarizing the students more generally to the library and its resources, and instructing more broadly about information literacy concepts. To balance these priorities, the teacher writes learning objectives in advance of each session, but her first and primary objective is always “student recognizes the library as a place to find help and be cared for.” Barnard College librarian Jenna Freedman (2016) said she will “sacrifice content the students need in favor of engaging their heads and heart,” because she felt her students would seek help later for anything not covered in the one-shot if this caring relationship has been established from their first encounter (p. 226).

Thinking now about Noddings' steps for a caring relation encounter, how can the librarian, teaching a room full of students, be attentive (to use Noddings' terminology, even *engrossed*) to the expressed needs of a student? Here are some thoughts. Be flexible in your understanding of the research assignment; when a student asks a question, do not assume the same answer you have delivered many times before is the correct one in this instance. Show interest in the student's research topic and ask clarifying questions. If the question came when you are walking around the room and have a moment to speak individually with the student, find out how the topic relates to the wider lens of their life experiences (very often the first-year assignments will be personal: related to their future career, the culture of their family, etc.). One way to be open to these encounters is to have a group activity in which the students are actively discussing these things with each other and listen in. If you happen to be in the front of the room when a question is asked, answer it briefly and remember to follow up individually when time allows.

It is important to show availability outside the classroom for a future encounter. As an adjunct for one semester in her first library teaching position, the author developed the habit of telling students she was hired entirely to help them and was sitting at her desk all day waiting to hear from them (not technically true, but close enough). When the author made the switch to full-time at another university, she decided telling students she was endlessly available was also mostly true: they were her first priority. To this end, the author gives students her email address and cell number and asks them to email/call/text anytime. The author shows them the Ask-A-Librarian options available as part of the library website tour but also encourages them to come directly to her with any kind of question. The author tries to entice them to reach out for help by offering goodies like checking their citation formatting or confirming the source they are using is peer-reviewed. In her adjunct position, the author was pleasantly surprised by the number of students who looked her up after the library session for help over email or came in for a reference consultation. It was clear that the instruction session could be positioned as the beginning of a student's relationship with the librarian and with the library.

Noddings (2012) made the important point too that "caring also implies competence" (p. 776). It is vital to inspire confidence in your students so that they see you as a viable option for expert help. In the classroom, this might mean demonstrating searches using student suggestions rather than a prepared search. It makes sense that students will not be too impressed by a search on a topic that the librarian has practiced and done again and again. For example, one of the typical first-year assignments the author sees asks students to research topics in their field or discipline using a variety of popular, scholarly, and trade sources. Instead of preparing in advance, the author asks students to volunteer their field for a search. One of the first times the author tried this, a student volunteered "astrophysics." Although astrophysics was widely outside the author's wheelhouse, she still was able to find relevant information; the hope is that this approach demonstrated no one needs be an expert in something to research it, and that the librarian can be of assistance in any topic. It also positioned the student as the leader for that activity.

In Noddings' final stage of the caring relation, the cared-for indicates in some way that the care has been received. This may be through a smile, a nod, a thank you, or any type of demonstration that the knowledge has been transferred. It is easy to see how this process could be completed during the one-shot session: the student asks a question, the librarian takes time to ensure they are responding to the expressed and not assumed need, uses knowledge and expertise to reflect and respond, and the student says thank you. Most likely

this is already happening multiple times in any given instruction session. If, though, the librarian cultivates a climate of care during the session, the door is opened to deeper caring relations.

An example of a deeper caring relationship can be seen in the author's interactions with "Anna." After a library instruction session, Anna reached out by email for further help on her research assignment. She and the author had a moment of bonding in class when she asked a question about researching education, and the author had asked her what prompted her to pursue a future in teaching. She said her mother had been a teacher for many years but was now the school librarian. The author's enthusiasm for both careers was clearly apparent, and, beyond answering her immediate question, she encouraged Anna to get in touch for any more help. When she later emailed, the author was delighted to set up a one-on-one reference consultation, and in the meantime, sent resources to get started. By the time the meeting occurred, Anna had almost entirely finished her project using the resources already sent but had decided to meet in person anyway since the author had set the time aside for her; she was already demonstrating care back to the librarian! The author and student used their time then to walk around the library; the author showed her where to find the print materials in her major as well as some of her favorite quiet working spots. They talked about her mother the librarian and what she could expect pursuing a teaching degree. The author gave Anna the card of the education librarian but told her that she personally would love to hear from her again in the future as well. The author followed up with an email the week the assignment was due, offering any last-minute help on that assignment and also just checking in. When the semester ended, Anna emailed a thank you again to let the author know she was generally doing well. The care demonstrated in the one-shot session, including teaching in a way that allowed for active discussion and questions, learning her name, expressing interest in her research subject, and offering wide availability outside the classroom through a number of modes of communication, led to a meaningful and caring two-way relation.

Conclusion

What if our first-year students came to the library for the first time and discovered there a librarian who knew their names, was interested in their research assignment and its relation to their lives, reflected carefully and responded to their expressed needs, was knowledgeable and credible, indicated wide availability outside of the library session, and sought further

and deeper relationships with them as individuals? Demonstrating an ethic of care across this large demographic of especially vulnerable students in the format that is available, the one-shot, can yield rewarding, caring relationships.

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