

# Decision-Making Around Disruptive Technologies: Using the Lens of a Christian Ethic of Care

**Tyler Watts**

Southern Wesleyan University

**Amy Flagler**

Montreat College

## Abstract

This article presents the Christian Ethic of Care as a framework for classroom decision-making with regard to new technologies that are exploding around the world — particularly how these disruptive technologies impact the teacher-student relationship, exacerbating questions of trust and ethical conduct. The authors, both teacher educators at the university level, suggest a framework for decision-making based on Jesus' example of grace and truth when dealing with technology innovations that disrupt learning. Scenarios using the framework and practical considerations are presented that recommend rethinking numerous areas of pedagogy.

**Key words:** Christian ethic of care; disruptive technologies; technology; decision-making; teacher-student relationship

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In the academic field, the past years have required faculty, students, and broader institutions to confront a rapidly changing classroom as a result of technological advancements. For example, teachers in higher education have contended with emergency remote teaching and hybrid learning practices due to COVID-19, and to the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning like ChatGPT. These innovations, while seeking to react to, and to solve real-life challenges, often can be a cause for soul-searching about the nature of pedagogical practice, and about the meaning of the role of a teacher or a learner. They also have the potential to exacerbate foundational challenges that have always existed in higher education. As Nguyen et al. (2022) noted, the complexity of these disruptive technologies “have led to potentially extensive ethical threats that trigger a pressing need for risk-intensive procedures to ensure the quality of delivery” (p. 2). Topics like student engagement, rigor, and academic integrity are regularly discussed on campuses; but when new technology disrupts classrooms, these topics take on new paradigms of thinking. How are we to react when technologies challenge our established teaching practices? As Christian scholars and higher education practitioners, how should our approaches reflect our faith?

A systematic engagement with technological disruptions to pedagogical practice requires strategic and intentional planning on our part as educators to ensure we are not merely being reactive. Paul in his letter to the Philippians emphasized that we are to be anxious about nothing and instead to petition God for wisdom (Phil. 4:6-7). Often our reactions to disruptive technologies can demonstrate anxiousness more than a confident trust in wisdom and a love for one another as brothers and sisters. We may inadvertently adopt practices that foster distrust in the student-teacher relationship, or may overreact by broadly banning tools because of the potential for misuse.

Any new technology challenges us to evaluate its potential for use or misuse in the learning endeavor; but as Christians, such innovations should also cause us to reflect on the ways we can live out the Gospel in our decisions around teaching. In order to not lose sight of the relational elements that undergird teaching practice, we must center on our human values (Nguyen et al., 2022).

One potential way to examine disruptive technologies — including their adoption and implementation — is to use a framework grounded in a Christian ethic of care. In the following sections, we will explore a Christian ethic of care and the literature around this framework. Then we will

discuss the framework as a potential tool for the analysis of disruptive technologies, and will provide practical suggestions for Christian educators. By using a framework such as the Christian ethic of care, we can use systematic decision-making around technologies that provide care, promote ethical practices, and advance learning.

### **The Christian Ethic of Care**

In keeping with the rapid changes in technology, ethics of all kinds are being considered in educational decision-making. Joorst (2021) explored the necessity of the ethics of care across educational settings, particularly now as the current trend towards systematic assessment makes it more challenging to find the time that is necessary for caring for the community. “The business of education at universities and schools is so fast-paced that there is little time for individual attention to student educators or learners” (Joorst, 2021, p. 2). This challenge is felt by educators at every level of the educational system.

As we traversed the topic of decision-making around disruptive technologies, we were encouraged by new voices calling for care. Ravitch’s (2020) work provided an encompassing way to approach the ethic of care by deepening relationships based on a radical interest in others. Hughes (2021) encouraged developing hope as a disposition in new teachers as a way to deepen their commitment to the students in their care.

Noddings (2013), in her extensive writing on care ethics, explained the ethic of care causes teachers to act when faced with a dilemma. “Caring requires me to respond to the initial impulse with an act of commitment: I commit myself either to overt action on behalf of the cared-for...or I commit myself to thinking about what I might do” (p. 81). While Noddings did not claim a Christian ethic, her work on the ethic of care can be applied to the work of the Christian educator.

The Christian ethic of care is that of compassion, commitment, and care developed through a relationship with Jesus. His intentional pursuit of us causes our personal ethics to be undergirded with grace as well. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8, NIV). As we have felt Jesus’ intentional pursuit, so we seek out those in need. This is what He models to us and what we choose to model to others. The Christian ethic of care impacts the way we care for ourselves, our learners, and our communities.

What does it look like to care for ourselves, as educators? How can we apply our care to our students and our colleagues as we navigate the current issues in education? These are questions we can ask to focus our decision-making through our belief system. For Christian educators,

the distinction in the ethic of care can be seen in the different ways we view relationships in the classroom. While Noddings (2013) argued that both the caregiver (the teacher) and one cared-for (the students) benefit from the care relationship in the classroom, the Christian ethic of care derives the power to care from a different source: a relationship with Christ. Anderson (2018) explained, “Teaching is a way of expressing God’s love to others and demonstrating our love for God” (p. 4). Without Christ, our motivation and perseverance to do the work of caring can only go as far as our will allows it.

### **Where and Who to Care for**

The Christian ethic of care as emphasized by Shotsberger (2012) described care for self, care for learners, and care for colleagues and the community. Caring for oneself is an important and necessary component of the Christian ethic of care. Without it, the ability to care for others is diminished. Talley (2018) explained “The great secret, hidden from the view of many, is that faith can only inform practice if you are actively sustaining your faith and it you” (p. 2). The challenges of higher education come at us like a never-ending conveyor belt. Technology delivers the issues faster than ever before. The Christian educator must consider ways to preserve their own care in the midst of caring for others.

Noddings (2013) described the reciprocal relationship that caring creates in the classroom, where the one caring and the one cared for both benefit from the relationship. “Caring involves two parties: the one-caring and the cared-for. It is complete when it is fulfilled in both” (p. 68). One important factor in this reciprocal relationship is that in order for the caring to be authentic, there needs to be freedom to respond (Noddings, 2013). Students must have choice and feel cared-for apart from their accomplishments in the classroom, just as God provides the Christian choice in responding to His care. The trust required to extend choice can be tested when disruptive technologies enter the relationship.

How we interact with our colleagues is a lateral component of the Christian ethic of care. While our colleagues may not need our full attention the way our students do, these relationships can either build our capacity to care, or they can turn our focus away from our learners (depending on the dynamics of these relationships). Colleagues can be a source of our own care or a place for us to show care. Like care of self, care of colleagues needs tending.

The effect that the Christian ethic of care has on schools can be transformative (Shotsberger, 2012). Shotsberger (2012) asked, “What is the optimal environment within which a Christian ethic of care can be lived out by its participants?” (p. 2). In fact, the structure of schools allows for frequent

opportunities for care. People who regularly collaborate and communicate know each other's needs. This can enable Christ's indwelling to emerge through care.

Finally, within the Christian ethic of care is a calling of care toward the community. This element of care extends beyond an institution or organization into the wider community. It is intended to elicit a response similar to the expert of the law in the Gospel passage who asked, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29, NIV). Just as Jesus expressed a wholly inclusive parable to delineate our neighbors, our pedagogical decisions, and the choices of tools that we use in the classroom, can have far-reaching effects into the wider world in which we live.

It is with the hope of the Gospel that Hughes (2021) wrote, "Collectively and intentionally, as educators we can steer our conversations, our tone, and our community response away from criticism and toward hope" (p. 4). Hope is a byproduct of the Christian ethic of care and it is what compels us to pursue a focus on others.

### Christian Ethic of Care & Decision-Making

The teacher, as the caregiver, makes decisions throughout the day based on the individual needs of his or her students. This is at the crux of many dilemmas for educators. How does one do this fairly when right or wrong is not entirely clear? How do we lead others in morally just decisions when we do not fully understand all of the long-term effects of the decisions? In what ways do we fear the impact of new technologies on our students' learning, and how do we show distrust toward them because of the availability of these technologies at their fingertips?

The ethic of care urges us to look for ways to better understand our students, and to build trusting relationships with them and with colleagues. In doing so, we make decisions based on that trust. Mathur and Corley (2014) described the complexities of care ethics in the way teachers respond to dilemmas each day in their classrooms, balancing the needs of the many with the individual. And it is through this reflective process that the Christian teacher's ethic of care can be a framework for decisions.

Collins and Ting (2014) shared their perspective that teachers are left to navigate ethical dilemmas often on their own, and they need tools and strategies to do this. The examples of how different teachers would handle the same dilemma are as numerous as the number of teachers in the higher education sector. Each one will approach a dilemma with the wisdom from within his or her own personal ethic that has developed from his or her own experiences, beliefs, and values. When technology is added to the mix, the perceptions, levels of experience and comfort, and

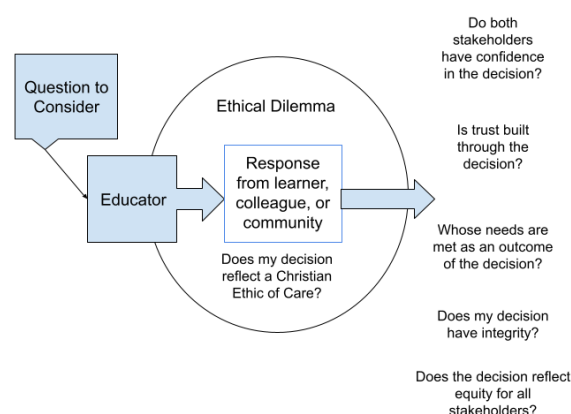
questions raised can complicate this decision-making process.

Using the principle of the Christian ethic of care, we have developed a framework for teachers to use to evaluate decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas. This framework may help educators determine not just what is ethical, but how to balance grace and truth in an ethical way. Anderson (2018) explained, "Christian teachers, as caregivers, become advocates of God's presence as they create a "healing" community in the classroom by extending grace in practical ways to their students" (p. 6). How we treat others as we face constant ethical dilemmas in and out of the classroom, will determine how they feel about Christ. Are they feeling His grace and truth through us, or are we building barriers to his love?

### Framework for Decisions- A Christian Ethic of Care Approach

If we are representing Christ's love to our students, certain characteristics will prove themselves in our relationships with them. Anderson (2018) stated, "A caring teacher-student relationship requires that teachers believe in the potential of their students and cultivate mutual trust and confidence between the students and themselves" (p. 6). The cultivated relationship requires knowing the needs of our students, understanding how to meet their needs, and persisting to bring forth fruit. Cultivating care can be done within the classroom, the entire school, and the broader community. Consider the following visual, created by the authors of this study, (Figure 1) to evaluate an ethical dilemma through the Christian ethic of care.

Figure 1: The Christian Ethic of Care Decision-Making Framework



Note: This is an author-created decision-making framework developed using the work of Shotsberger (2012) around dimensions of the Christian ethic of care.

In using this framework, we can evaluate how stakeholders might respond to decisions and whether they feel cared for or not. Take for example three real-life scenarios that may be common to your own teaching experience. In presenting the scenarios, the framework will be used to help provide a lens through which we might consider some of the ethical challenges raised by disruptive technologies.

### The “Plagiarizing” Student

In a recent experience, a student submitted a paper through our college learning management system (LMS) that was flagged for plagiarism by the academic surveillance tool. A significant amount of the paper was shown as unoriginal even though citations were in place. After discussing the potential issue with my student, I was able to see her early drafts, notes, and outlines that led to her current draft. It appeared that she had done the work. She felt distrusted and angry that artificial intelligence had made it seem like she had cheated. I was left feeling unsure of how to discriminate between what she was sharing with me and what the surveillance tool was showing. Whom do I believe?

In using the Christian ethic of care framework, my question could be, *Should I rely solely on the academic surveillance software to check for plagiarism for this paper?* Positives and negatives could be weighed as I evaluate my students’ potential responses to my decision. I could reflect on whether trust is built or potentially broken by use of the technology. I could also consider if my decision encourages integrity and equity for all involved. Are my students’ needs met by use of the software or is it an obstacle for trust and deep learning? Using this framework can help me consider other options that can build trust and improve learning experiences.

In the case of a term paper, turning in an outline, a rough draft, and then a final draft can provide formative learning opportunities and reduce a reliance solely on software for determining authorship. Using this framework would be a step in making challenging choices.

### The “Unengaged” Student

Similar to the scenario above, I recently encountered a situation in which the metrics of the LMS indicated that a student was disengaged and not regularly on the pages where course readings and resources were housed. Many of these resources were created to be read within the course itself, rather than going out to a separate system, so the software indicated that the student was spending only a cursory time on those particular pages. My initial reaction as I saw this metric was a distrust of the student regarding the effort in the course.

In using the Christian ethic of care framework, it was important to step back and consider the factors at play. Did I have all the information available? Was my use of the metrics fostering trust or was it creating a barrier between my students and myself, based on analytics and not performance in the course itself? The student was doing well in the course and so I questioned the metric; but if the student was not showing mastery of the content, would that have impacted my view of the student’s engagement in the course?

I had an informal conversation with the student about the readings and found that the student was downloading and printing the material. The student was deeply engaged in the reading offline, largely due to an undocumented disability. If I were to have relied on the LMS data alone, my assumptions and conclusions about the student would be incorrect, and would potentially foster distrust in our relationship throughout the course.

### The Hidden Labor of ChatGPT

Outside of the more direct teacher-student relationship, we might look to recent developments around large language models (LLM) like ChatGPT that pose new pedagogical challenges. As many of my students will contend with technologies in their own future classrooms, I was eager to investigate and employ ChatGPT and other tools in my classroom so that students might weigh the benefits and challenges associated with this new technology. The potential for academic dishonesty, and the value of such tools in being a collaborative writing partner, were offered as topics for discussion within our coursework. One area that struck me in reading about the tools, particularly with ChatGPT, was the hidden labor practices associated with the development of such AI solutions. As Perrigo (2023) reported, OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, used outsourced companies in Kenya to screen and filter the dataset for inappropriate terms or phrases. Workers making less than two dollars a day were subjected to such language as part of their job, and were given little consideration for their own well-being or trauma that might arise from the work.

In considering the framework around the Christian ethic of care, particularly the impact on care for the community, we can ask if the development of such tools promote or hinder the equity of all stakeholders. We should make decisions that consider the business practices involved in the design and data of such tools. As a Christian educator, I chose to bring up this element with my students, asking them to consider how our technology choices encourage such practices. This led to a robust discussion of our role as Christians in the global community. I was able to share that while I see the value in the use of ChatGPT, I have chosen

not to engage with the tool because the development of the product was contrary to a recognition of the inherent value of humans, and to the protection of human labor.

### Practical Consideration

Beyond the scenarios above, which utilize the Christian ethic of care to help raise questions about action around specific technologies, there are some practical considerations and questions that arise as we make decisions around technologies, and as we discern the impact of such technologies on our teaching:

- Take a critical eye towards any new tool. Consider how it will impact all parties within the Christian ethic of care framework.
- Context is essential to consider. What works for one class may not work for others due to class size, level of learning, and other factors. Respect and value the decisions of others.
- Promote authentic assessment and the learning process. Evaluate your assessment practices so that learners have opportunities to demonstrate the process, rather than the product of their learning.
- Start from a position of trust toward your students, colleagues, and community. Often our tools do not emphasize that trust relationship; but we can mindfully begin there.
- Value agency, privacy, and labor in your decisions.

As Christians who aim to reflect God's care, we can put relationships first, rely on Christ in all things, and build trust as the basis for decision-making in the classroom. Shotsberger (2012) explained, "We cannot escape this higher calling, because to deny the call is to deny our faith" (p. 4). While new technologies may disrupt our teaching, they may also bring new opportunities to consider better practices within our classrooms. At the same time, we hope the recommendations provided can help us point students to the excellence that Christ calls us to in all things, including those that are within our academic spaces.

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### Author Information

Tyler Watts  
Southern Wesleyan University  
[tdwatts@swu.edu](mailto:tdwatts@swu.edu)

Amy Flagler  
Montreat College  
[Amy.flagler@montreat.edu](mailto:Amy.flagler@montreat.edu)