Toward Humanizing Online Learning Spaces

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Humanizing Online Learning   Humanizing Instructional Design   Freirean Online Pedagogy and Design

What does it mean to center our collective humanity in online learning spaces? This paper outlines an example of efforts to intentionally design a humanizing learning environment for an online, asynchronous university course. Our understanding of 'humanization' emerges in dialogue with Paulo Freire's theoretical framing, which connects humanization with liberatory education. Within this context, we describe instructional and learning design approaches to build community, engage in dialogic and critical study and struggle, and center grace and care. We conclude with insights gained and challenges experienced with this form of teaching and learning and discuss possible avenues for future course designs.

Introduction

"The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that [they] can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves."

~ Paulo Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 181)

Online learning has become a staple in our current social context. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, with 98% of university courses taking place online in 2020 (ThinkImpact, 2020). While many education institutions are now shifting back to the in-person classroom model, virtual learning spaces have become more commonplace since the widespread upheaval we experienced in 2020. As we emerge slowly from this emergency use of online learning, we have an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities, challenges, and complexities of the virtual classroom. In this paper, we grapple with what it might mean to intentionally design and inhabit a humanizing online learning space. Through this process, we operated within the transitional space between instructional design and learning design, as dialogic components in a student-centered approach to teaching and learning. Our conception of humanization is formed through conversation with Paulo Freire's theoretical framing of what it means to be fully human in his text Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 2000). Freire argues that both the oppressed and the oppressors are dehumanized in such a dichotomous setting; humanization requires blurring the lines between these two poles to create a new way of being that transcends the binary and frees us to be more fully human. As a pedagogical construct, this approach acknowledges power dynamics within education, namely as experienced through the student-teacher binary, and moves us toward a relational learning environment where teachers are co-learners and students are co-teachers, thus

transcending predefined roles to embrace our full humanity. Within this framework of humanization, we outline pedagogical approaches we experimented with to build community, engage in dialogic and critical study and struggle, and center grace and care. Our goal is not to present this work as novel interventions; rather, by sharing our experiences, we hope to engage instructional and learning designers in a broader discourse about humanizing education. Within a scholarly context, we describe our work as action research in service of critically reviewing and growing our praxis as instruction and learning design practitioners. In this paper, we begin by describing the course, our own intersectional identities, and the overarching field of study, to contextualize this exploration. Next, we unpack what 'humanization' might mean within an online learning environment, in dialogue with Freire's work. We then outline how we embodied humanization through praxis, and conclude with questions and possibilities for future explorations.

We position our work and ourselves as works-in-progress, grappling with what it means to be human in our disembodied online learning spaces. Our pedagogy was shaped by the rich lineage of liberatory teaching practices. We described our efforts as 'experiments' in line with abolitionist scholar Mariame Kaba's wisdom that our freedom struggle will need a million experiments; "A bunch will fail. That's good because we'll have learned a lot that we can apply to the next ones." (Filter, 2020). In this spirit, our work is an offering to be in conversation with past, present, and future explorations of how we might create an education landscape that enables us to be more fully and freely human. While the contours of our specific course were limited to an online and asynchronous format, our struggles and lessons could also apply to a face-to-face or hybrid classroom model. Still, the virtual framework offers a unique set of challenges to humanization that we wanted to focus on specifically. Online learning can feel more isolating (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004) and does not offer as much flexibility in adapting to class dynamics as you would have in a face-to-face setting. As such, we needed to be more intentional and explicit about instructional content, expectations, and learning activities. In order to set up this framing, we also had to develop a course structure early on. This process could be seen as analogous to setting up a physical classroom space to establish the tone and atmosphere for a lesson. However, this approach also raises a tension between offering enough structure so that students can work through the course easily, and providing opportunities for students to engage in the course in a way that is meaningful to them. We navigated this in-between space through dialogue, reflection, and experimentation. Our course evolved throughout the semester, as we adapted our strategies and made space for student voices to shape our class environment. We strove to shift away from a Euro-centric pedagogical paradigm and instead explore a constellation of knowledge traditions and ways of knowing. We asked and followed critical questions about whose voices have shaped popular or dominant narratives about and within education and society, and engaged with course material that stemmed from non-dominant scholarly discourse and lived experiences. Our goal was not to create an epistemological hierarchy nor identify a "best" practice in favor of others. On the contrary, we aimed to live in the questions as scholars and encourage our students to complicate their perspectives beyond a binary framing of good-and-bad or right-and-wrong. We share our story in an effort to grapple with what liberation, justice, and equity might look and feel like in an online learning environment.

Arundhati Roy posited that the pandemic is a portal: "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy, 2020). Applying this notion to virtual learning, what might we take with us as we travel through this time-space portal, and what should we leave behind? Perhaps we let go of control and punitive measures and take with us our curiosity and compassion. As the global context changes around us, we have an opportunity to rethink and possibly transform how we approach teaching and learning. This is especially true for online learning spaces, and may also bring into question overarching tenets of traditional education practices that are embedded in virtual education environments.

Background

This paper explores the instructional and learning design process for a course offered through a public university whose main campus is situated in the heart of an urban locale and is the academic home for over 30 thousand students, a majority (over 70%) of whom are white (University data, 2021). Given that our course was offered via an online platform, students could enroll from around the world. Still, the racial demographics of our class aligned closely with that of the university. Faculty employed at the university are also over 70% white. These institutional demographics sit within the

backdrop of the university's home-city population of 300 thousand residents, 66% white and 23% Black (U.S. Census, 2021). Zooming out from our course in this way offers a broader view of racial power dynamics within the social systems that govern our academic journey. To further contextualize our work, we offer the dimensions of our classroom structure, as well as our own intersectional identities and socio-political locations.

Course Overview

The work described herein centers on an online, asynchronous, graduate-level course entitled 'Education & Society.' Our focus for this course was to engage students in thinking critically about education and society and to contextualize their learned perspectives and lived experiences within a broader, systemic framework. As such, we aimed to provide students with material that caused them to question dominant (or popularly known and propagated) narratives in the U.S., and at minimum add more nuance to their understanding of education and interconnected social systems.

We utilized the Canvas learning management system as our primary learning space. Course content was organized into modules, and followed a story arc that began by reflecting on our relationships with schooling, then placed schooling within a broader social context, next examined educational movements, and finally explored possibilities for the futures of education and society. Each module included core material (readings, podcast episodes, or videos) to engage with around a related subtopic. Students used discussion forums, Padlet, or collective annotation to dialogically reflect on the resources we explored. They also produced scholarly artifacts (e.g., papers, presentations, infographics, etc.) to grapple with course material and conversations. Below is a sample list of course content we covered during a 15-week period for this graduate-level course offered during the 2021 fall semester.

- Explore the concept of 'knowledge' to critically assess the types of knowledge traditions that are valued and those that are devalued.

- Revisit the Brown vs. Board of Education case from the perspectives of Black educators of that time, and wrestle with the questions their stories inspire.

- Examine how white supremacist concepts are coded into education policies, and interrogate their impacts.

- Explore critical pedagogies (i.e. fugitive, Black feminist, critical disability, etc.) and consider their potential for building a more just education system.

- Delve into the school-to-prison pipeline, along with the historical and institutional infrastructures that enable this system to persist based primarily on anti-Black racism.

- Explore socio-political movements that push for more equity and justice in education, including Freedom Schools, Black radical traditions, and Indigenous knowledge traditions.

- Speculate about possible avenues for freedom futures in education, in conversation with scholars such as James Baldwin and Gholdy Muhammad.

Course objectives were aligned with Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's (2020) five learning pursuits, as laid out in her book 'Cultivating Genius': Identity Development, Skills, Intellect, Criticality, and Joy.

Identity Development through an exploration of how our personal experiences with schooling are shaped by the broader construct of education and society.

Skills through engagement with course material and our learning community, which required us to practice reading, critical thinking, listening, articulating, writing, inquiry, analysis, empathy, and imagination.

Intellect through dialogue with readings and other media that offer new knowledge, or deepen our existing knowledge, on how education functions in society.

Criticality through following our emerging questions in order to arrive at more in-depth and refined questions related to systems of education, and the movements within and outside them.

Joy through embracing the excitement of, along with the vulnerability and humility in, wondering and not knowing, and through staying connected to our purpose as educators and community members.

A typical course week began on Monday and ended on Sunday. Students engaged with core material (readings, podcasts, videos, etc.) during the week and shared their learning via coursework (in the form of a scholarly artifact or dialogic post) at the end of each week. We offered dialogic feedback on student work (individually and in group discussions), and sent out a weekly announcement to summarize our collective learning, draw connections between the different modules, and offer insights on the transition to the upcoming week's exploration. Our course engaged 25 students who joined from a range of locations (including internationally), primarily from Pennsylvania. A majority of students identified as white, a large percentage were cis women, and most held full-time jobs in addition to pursuing a Master's degree, which this course was tied to. Students were situated in a variety of disciplinary fields including Library and Information Science; Higher Education Management; Education Leadership; Applied Developmental Psychology; Public and International Affairs; Applied Behavior Analysis; Curriculum and Instruction; Special Education; Early Childhood Education; and Social and Comparative Analysis in Education. This brought a rich and wide range of experiences and understandings about the topics we explored together related to education and society.

Co-Facilitation

The two co-authors of this paper co-designed and co-facilitated the course discussed herein. Tinukwa Boulder's breadth of knowledge in instructional design shaped the course structure within the given learning management system. This included ensuring content was accessible and building an organizational structure for the course that students could easily follow. Beatrice Dias' extensive background in community engagement guided our approach to centering care and relationality in our pedagogy. This entailed building a course environment that was welcoming, engaging students through thought-provoking content and dialog, and making space for student voice and choice.

Additionally, as two professors and scholars who identify as women of color, we brought the complexity of our own intersections of identity, and connections to education and society into the course design. Through reflective practices, we invited students to bring their own framing for sense-making into our course conversations. This process connected to our overarching goal of growing our scholarship by following a process of deep and authentic inquiry; one that stems from an honest reckoning with who we are and asks questions that compel us to closely examine how our perceptions of the world are constructed. Pursuing such a scholarly journey can often be uncomfortable because we must confront ways we benefit from oppressive structures (white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.), and move through defensive reactions and guilt toward reconciliation and action.

Our collaborative journey in designing and facilitating this online course was grounded in liberatory pedagogical principles and values. We drew on the wisdom of Perlow, et al. (2018) to intentionally "counter white supremacist and patriarchal hegemony" and "create positive, deep structural shifts in the ways of being, worldviews, and actions of those under their tutelage" (p. 2). This work challenged us (as co-facilitators) to reflect on our course design principles and teaching approaches. Specifically, to explore and interrogate our collective commitments to developing co-liberated learning spaces, nurturing resistance narratives, and creating online community space for healing and empowerment. Perlow et al. engaged with "unbinding pedagogy from the academy and white supremacist education" while incorporating and "celebrating the rich rebellious resistance" (p. 3) of counter pedagogies and knowledge traditions. We enacted "unbinding pedagogies" by pushing against a teacher-driven learning environment and shifting the power dynamic in the online course. Instead, we moved toward creating dialogic learning experiences in line with Freire's relational pedagogical teachings, to engage both co-facilitators and students around a series of complex questions, topics, and ideas. Thus, we were able to step outside the teacher-as-expert framing and enjoy the freedom to engage in our course as co-learners as well as co-facilitators of collective learning.

Related Work: Contextualizing Humanization

The exploration of humanization outlined in this paper is situated within an online learning environment. Therefore, it is important to contextualize our work by reviewing the ways in which humanization (and thereby, dehumanization) is broadly framed within the field of technology innovation and digital media. To this end, we explored how humanization is situated within the general landscape of technology innovation and online learning. In addition, we sought to be in dialogue with scholars who are also invested in humanizing online learning as a process of liberation. Note that we do not present an exhaustive review of literature, but rather offer a sampling of work in the field to help locate our particular exploration within online learning.

In the space of technological innovation, the term 'humanization' may take on several different meanings. In some cases humanization is literally interpreted as making technology more human-like; while in other instances, humanization entails optimizing for user-friendliness, improving accessibility, incorporating ethical design, and/or addressing human needs in some way (Lynden, 2018). These forms of "humanized" technologies are epitomized in artificial intelligence (AI) innovations that are now more prevalent in our everyday transactions. Chatbots, smart home platforms (e.g., Alexa, Google Assistant, etc.), and other interactive technological systems are designed to mimic human behavior in order to present as more approachable and friendly to their human users. Technology that addresses human needs in their design, can take the form of focusing on creating more user-friendly and appealing platforms (e.g., human-centered design) or increasing efficiency through technology augmentation (e.g. voice commands on a remote control). However, these framings of humanization are often underlined by economic factors rather than humanist motivations (Watters, 2021). As such, there are often costs associated with usership, including our privacy, attention, personal data, power, and autonomy. Without a critical and dialogic lens, such approaches toward humanization can very easily lead to dehumanizing conditions (Vorhauser-Smith, 2017). Our work sought to deepen the way we think about humanization in relation to technology by entering into conversation with Freire's pedagogical theories.

The field of instructional design has also explored humanization in the context of building stronger relationships between teachers and students (Jones et al., 2008), utilizing equity-focused theoretical frameworks (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020), and critically analyzing the ideological perspectives incorporated in education technologies (Strobel & Tillberg-Webb, 2006). Several scholars have embarked on similar journeys to explore what it might mean to humanize online learning within the context of liberatory pedagogies, from the lens of learning designers. Abdi, Marshall, & Khalifa (2020) discuss community-oriented practices in online learning environments that were specifically rooted in the pedagogical wisdom of women of color educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their work highlighted the humanizing aspects of communal and collective educator practices "...Based on epistemologies emerging from histories of resistance and liberatory politics" (Abdi et al., 2020). Thus, explicitly attending to race and identity, while deeply valuing knowledge traditions rooted in community and experience, paved a path toward recognizing and actively counteracting dehumanization in virtual classroom settings. Dhala & Johnson (2021) also explore community-focused online pedagogy through a feminist lens, in conversation with bell hooks' theoretical framing. Although they do not explicitly discuss humanization, much of their work resonates with our approach to creating more humanizing conditions in a virtual classroom setting. Their efforts were grounded in their commitments to justice and inclusion, and they embodied practices that shared power with students and set guiding principles for being in a relational learning community. Following a similar critical perspective, Mehta & Aguilera (2020) approached humanizing online learning by building on the Freirean lineage of humanizing pedagogy. Their work specifically focused on confronting the tensions between autonomous models of learning design and critical approaches to humanizing teaching and learning. The vignettes they presented push us to consider whose gaze we frame humanization around, and as such whose voices and experiences might be overlooked and thereby dehumanized, even when we go in with an intention to be inclusive. Wisdom from their analysis encourages us to consistently check in and question our practices through a critical lens and through a collective process. Building on the rich contributions of these scholars, we situate our work as an empirical offering to extend the conversation about humanizing online learning spaces for our collective liberated futures.

Humanizing Instructional Design

Our understanding of humanization is based on Paulo Freire's theoretical framing of what it means to be fully human in his landmark text Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 2000). Freire positioned humanization in the context of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction and posited that our path to full humanity is a struggle for liberation through a pedagogy of the oppressed. Collective liberation is only possible through resolving the contradictions of the oppressed and oppressor within us all.

> Liberation is… a childbirth, and a painful one. The [individual] who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor nor oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom. (Freire, 2000, p. 49).

As such, Freire posits that the path to being fully human is rooted in our relationality with each other and the world, and requires love, trust, critical reflection, collective struggle, and authentic dialogue. Applying Freire's theoretical framing as a pedagogy of humanization in our online learning space, offered a way for us to view humanization as a pursuit of our collective liberation, contextualized with an understanding of oppressive structures operating at the intersections of education and technology.

Within Freire's framing, our goal was to counter normative teaching practices through our humanizing approaches to online learning. Namely, we sought to dismantle the notion of the teacher as an expert; to subvert punitive structures in education that are encoded in online learning management systems; and to reject political neutrality as a pedagogical position. In the classroom context, this liberatory process, for us, entailed authentic dialogue and relational learning; compassionate policies and language; and critical reflection with an explicit focus on how race, class, gender, disability, and other aspects of identity are implicated in systems of education and society.

Connecting with students in a virtual space presents barriers to authentic engagement. We utilized authentic reflection, stemming from a place of honesty and vulnerability, as a pathway to building relationships of trust and open dialogue with students. "Dialogue, as the encounter among [people] to "name" the world, is a fundamental precondition for their true humanization" (Freire, 2000, p. 137). Relationality played a pivotal role in our virtual classroom through our guidelines and practices. Each interaction with students was designed to be dialogic, through embodying the role of problem-posing educators (as defined by Freire), who presented complex aspects of education and society in order to engage students in critical discourse. As co-facilitators of the course, we embraced humility as teacher-students, who learned with and from our student-teachers. "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 2000, p. 72). As such, we attempted to create a learning environment of both/and, where the teachers were also students, and the students were also teachers. Thus, in the context of our course, we aimed to be "…dialogical, problem-posing, teacher-students" (Freire, 2000, p. 93).

The project of becoming fully human requires breaking from the binary of oppressed-oppressor to create a new being who is neither oppressed nor oppressor, but a person in the process of liberation (Freire, 2000). For the oppressors, through the act of oppressing others, dehumanize themselves as well. This struggle compelled us to recognize our internalized and learned behaviors that stem from a pedagogy of domination. We identified punitive structures built into the learning management technology, as well as within our own practices, and actively worked toward creating different, more compassionate, ways of interacting with our students. Fundamentally, Freire's pedagogical theory is rooted in love; not in the capitalist sense of ownership, but in a relational framing of courage to act in the name of our collective liberation. "Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is a commitment to their cause— the cause of liberation" (Freire, 2000, p. 89). We took on this charge and embedded practices of care and grace throughout our course structure. Our approach specifically centered on grades and grading, which are often operationalized as punitive measures to encourage a conformed set of behaviors. In resisting this mechanism, we actively grappled with the concept of grades alongside our

students and sought alternative models for assessment that were more humanizing. Alfie Kohn's work was particularly pivotal in our critical examination of grading. Kohn has long contested the utility of grades and studied their harmful impacts (Kohn, 2011). Our analysis of, and approach to, grades and grading was shaped by Kohn's insights as well as those of scholars who are exploring alternatives to grading (Stommel, 2021). We also paid close attention to our choice of words, and were intentional in disrupting hostile classroom structures reinforced through language in the form of mandates and consequences, and instead emphasized relational and collective study and struggle.

The process of surmounting oppression requires critical reflection to understand the roots of oppressive systems and take action to transform those structures. We embedded critical reflection throughout our course, as a process of re-examining dominant narratives about education and society, to unveil oppressive systems and take on the challenge of transforming them. In doing so, we embraced teaching as a political act and repudiated notions of academic neutrality. As Henry Giroux notes: "Those arguing that education should be neutral are really arguing for a version of education in which nobody is accountable" (Cultural Research and Innovation, 2019). In holding ourselves accountable for building more just and equitable futures, we directly and explicitly wrestled with the political dimensions of the topics we explored. This praxis is also in line with Freire's humanizing and liberatory pedagogy of the oppressed, which requires us to confront dominant culture, and through reflective study, work toward its transformation. In our pursuit of learning, we worked collectively with students and the material we explored together, to ask critical questions and follow those questions to reveal new questions and insights.

Humanization in Practice

Our online, asynchronous course offered ample opportunities for us to put into practice our conceptualization of a humanizing pedagogy. We experimented with various approaches that often challenged our own habits of mind, and pushed us to imagine different ways of teaching and learning; moving away from rewards and punishments and toward relationships and care. In this section, we outline three interconnected praxes we developed to humanize our teaching and learning environment: (1) Relational Learning; (2) Compassionate Policies; and (3) Critical Reflection. These approaches are not presented as prescriptive; rather, we share our experiences to be in conversation with others invested in humanizing online learning.

Relational Learning

Relationality requires connecting with one another and the world we inhabit. As such, we strove to establish a supportive learning community and position ourselves as facilitators who are also co-learners.

Learning Community. Early in the course, we prioritized creating opportunities for us to learn more about each other, in meaningful ways. For example, we created an introductory peer discussion forum that enabled course facilitators and students to get to know each other and discover students' questions and wonderings about the course, as well as related topics of interest. In order to develop conditions conducive to authentic dialogue, we adopted the Relational Responsibilities outlined in Sabina Vaught's syllabus (Vaught, 2021). These responsibilities entailed a set of guidelines we followed when engaging in discourse within our learning community. As part of this process, we invited students, and committed ourselves, to study deeply, engage generously, treat each other with respect, affirm our affective responses as part of a just intellectual project, and recognize each other's contributions as gifts to the community. Using these precepts as a basis for engagement, paved the way for us to learn as a community of scholars through authentic dialogue and critical reflection.

Students engaged enthusiastically in the introductory activity and began forming connections with one another. This initial exchange helped set up an environment of open dialogue through the personal stories we shared and with the room to listen to and be heard within our learning platform. When students joined interactive activities in the course, our relational responsibilities served as a framework for community building within a scholarly context. These guidelines were particularly useful when navigating disagreements around course topics. Most notably, making these responsibilities explicit supported us, as course facilitators, in reminding students about how we aspire to be in the

community, and modeling how we might challenge another person's ideas in a scholarly manner, without disparaging or insulting them.

Teacher-Student. As course facilitators, we intentionally positioned ourselves as learners alongside students. This enabled us to embrace the teacher-student role that Freire outlines and learn with and from students. We engaged in course discussions and activities as co-learners (not experts), which deepened and complicated our own understanding of the topics we explored collectively. Approaching the course with this form of humility brought us joy as learners, and allowed us to be in authentic conversation with the class. We also took the risk of being vulnerable with students, by sharing our own reflections and personal connections to course material. Our embodiment of the teacher-student was not a literal mimicry of all that students did; rather, this framing shaped our approach to facilitating the course with a learner perspective that enabled us to see our students as co-learners as well as teachers and wisdom-holders. Finally, throughout the course, we strove to recognize and value students' wisdom, and personal and professional experiences, as key aspects of our collective knowledge and growth.

Student survey responses, from self-assessments and course evaluations, demonstrated that they valued our approach to learning with and from them. Several students noted that they felt supported and a part of a learning community with us. Although not statistically significant, these anecdotal data offer us some insight into the ways students experienced our efforts to be learners alongside them.

Authentic Dialogue. A regular practice we instituted for this course was weekly communications about our plans for that week and lessons we gleaned from the prior week. This enabled students to be engaged with our process of co-facilitation, and built in transparent insight into our evolving thinking and learning. Additionally, we offered each student an individualized mid-semester review, which highlighted their contributions to the course, recommended pathways for expanding their scholarship, and provided another opportunity to reach out to us about any aspects of the course they were struggling with. This form of authentic discourse, along with self-assessments administered after each module, enabled us to stay in conversation with students about the contours of the course.

Through these exchanges, the course evolved as we adapted our course design and pedagogical approach in dialogue with students. Perhaps the most notable dialogic process in our course was related to the grading policy. We openly grappled with the dehumanizing aspects of grading alongside our students. Our eventual "grading with care" policy was a compilation of student and facilitator input. This co-constructed policy honored the market value of a grade, which students highlighted, and also acknowledged our collective desire to explore more liberatory approaches to valuing and assessing our scholarly work. Overall, this communication infrastructure resonated with students, based on their comments about feeling engaged and connected as a member of our course community.

Compassionate Policies

Throughout the course, we adopted an approach based on care and grace. This was in defiance of punitive and dehumanizing structures incorporated into many traditional classrooms such as point deductions for late submissions, rigid and mandatory rules for participation, grade penalties for failure to complete work, etc. We find similar, and in some ways, more unforgiving, consequential frameworks encoded in online learning management systems. These consequential elements often serve to focus students on learning within the confines of avoiding negative impacts on their grade rather than engaging joyfully with course material (Kohn, 2011). In order to build a humanizing online classroom, we decided to center our course design on compassion and developed policies through this lens.

Grading with Care. Punitive classroom structures are primarily associated with grades, which are often used as leverage to conform behavior and action. A great example of this is the automated grading feature in the learning management system that, if enabled, can automatically deduct a percentage of points for late submissions, or refuse to accept submissions after a certain time frame. While we understand the need to keep a certain pace for a course, enforcing such policies in the absence of a dialogic process is dehumanizing. Therefore, we manually managed any grading aspects of the course and stayed in conversation with students about their progress with coursework. This allowed us to be responsive to individual student needs and facilitate the course with compassion rather than by

policing student actions. Due dates were set to help keep us on track in the course, but were not inflexible and could be adapted to accommodate student needs and challenges. In addition, we embraced a more expansive view of what engagement might look like and did not surveil student work closely. Instead, we periodically reviewed student submission status and checked in, one-on-one, with individuals who missed coursework, but only to ask if they needed an extension or any support. This enabled us to better understand and curate learning plans that met student needs, especially while we were all still struggling through the broader context of a global pandemic.

As part of our "Grading with Care" policy, individual coursework was not assigned a letter grade or points; rather, submissions were simply categorized as complete, incomplete, or excused. Our hope was that this approach would deemphasize working for a grade, and instead encourage study and struggle motivated purely by the desire to grow. Self-assessments and feedback from course facilitators and peers were other avenues for dialogic engagement and relational learning. It's important to note that our approach to self-assessment was centered on formative reflection and not on summative grade assignment (Andrade, 2019). Our goal was not focused solely on disrupting the power dynamics of grading by simply transferring the task of grading to our students. Rather, we wanted to subvert the reductionist view of student learning that is embodied in a summative letter grade by offering students a rich dataset of feedback and reflection that demonstrated their growth throughout the course. Still, our grading policy ultimately exemplified the tensions entailed in pursuing liberatory education within systems enmeshed in a dominant culture. While we were able to adapt our policy to make space for care and grace, we nonetheless had to assign a final letter grade (as per university policy), and this grade also impacted students beyond the academic sphere (e.g. financial support tied to minimum grades). To reduce the burden of grade stress on our students, we offered a minimum B grade for simply completing coursework. Although this was a far less meaningful assessment than the individualized feedback and exchanges we had with students, it served the purpose of not harming students beyond the course, within structures that are based on such metrics (e.g. university degrees, job markets, scholarships, etc.).

Although one or two students found it unsettling to not have specific grades for each assignment, most students appreciated the more relaxed learning environment. In addition, students reported how much they appreciated the extension of grace with regard to coursework. Most notably, we saw consistent and meaningful engagement from most students throughout the semester, even within this low-stakes framework for course grades. While not conclusive, we feel this supports our belief that it is possible to create class environments that are untethered to grades, while also producing thoughtful and quality student learning and engagement.

Positive Response Protocol. Throughout the course, we used a "Positive Response Protocol," which was adapted from Richard Koch's The Mindful Writing Workshop (2020). This protocol guided all forms of feedback we offered students, whether in discussion posts, collective annotations, or in response to coursework submissions. We also encouraged students to utilize this protocol when giving each other feedback. As a practice, unlike feedback based on critique, the Positive Response Protocol, or PQS protocol, entailed reading or listening with the explicit intent to appreciate your peer's efforts and ideas as gifts to the community, which was in keeping with our relational responsibilities. Our feedback began with a positive response, followed by questions that prompt students to think more deeply about a topic (problem-posing, in Freire's context) and suggestions for possible future directions students could take in their reflection and exploration. While this approach was structured through the PQS model, it was also flexible and expansive so that we could be in generative discourse with each student, on an individual basis, through our feedback. Implementing this protocol also created an atmosphere that invited students to be more authentic in their offerings, and for us to value and learn from students' wisdom in new and meaningful ways. In course evaluations and self-assessment survey responses many students highlighted the PQS protocol as a valuable tool in supporting their authentic participation in the course.

Critical Reflection

From the onset, our course centered on non-dominant perspectives and narratives related to education and society. We wanted students to question normative and dominant narratives often taken for granted as truths, so as to complicate their understanding of our past, present, and future. A great example of this is our exploration of the landmark case Brown vs. Board of Education. Students were tasked with reconciling what they held as truth about that case with what

they learned from core material that highlighted the perspectives of Black educators from that time (Gladwell, 2017). This led to a more nuanced and complex understanding of the historical context and present-day implications of that Supreme Court ruling. We used a similar approach to collectively explore how indigenous knowledge traditions can disrupt and possibly enhance the traditional canon for scientific exploration, in conversation with Brayboy and Maughan (2009). In addition, we reflected on how Black power and radical imagination, as exemplified in the work of the Black Panther Party, pushed for more liberated and equitable forms of education through the freedom schools movement (Rickford, 2016). Through all our explorations, the material and scholars we engaged with illuminated critical questions about how education and society are structured and operate.

Student Resistance and Growth. During some of our course conversations that critically examined dominant narratives, we experienced notable resistance from a few students. A common refrain we heard was that we only presented "one side" of the story, or had a singular political vantage or agenda from which we curated course material and our responses to student submissions. These comments underscored the normative expectation of neutrality in, and the binary nature of, popular discourse, which is often reinforced in conventional media and rhetoric. Of course, the notion of impartiality itself is complicit in hegemonic societal structures; it is not a relational position, instead neutrality, while posing as a moral ideal, is rooted in upholding the status quo. "No one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality. I cannot be in the world decontextualized, simply observing life" (Freire, 1998, p.73). Our approach was indeed not aimed at objectivity; rather, our goal was to disrupt and complicate widely accepted narratives that emerge from the center of power. That is, we asserted that perspectives emerging from the edges of power are central to our study and inquiry. We encouraged students to struggle with their conceptions of neutrality by asking questions about why they needed a reiteration of normative perspectives. Notably, a majority of our students reported that their thinking was challenged through the course and that they readily welcomed the complexity we introduced to their thinking.

In their final portfolio project submissions, we invited students to engage in sense-making by drawing connections between the various topics we explored and to reflect on how the course as a whole impacted their perspectives and grew/pushed their thinking. Several students highlighted how the course expanded their understanding of the historical context of education and enhanced their analysis of the procedures and structures incorporated in educational institutions. Overall, most students identified a sense of agency to ask critical questions and grapple with how they might contribute to a more just and equitable education landscape. One student beautifully articulated this sentiment: "This course challenged me to think past what I had known to be true in the past. It has made me realize that the things that I was taught in school were filtered through a narrow lens that only acknowledges certain points of view. The impact of this is that I will now question whose perspective I am being taught information through, whose voices are being left out, and whether I am learning the full/accurate picture of events." This was, ultimately, the purpose of our pedagogical process; that is, to engage students in critical discourse as part of a humanizing scholarly project.

Facilitator Study and Struggle. Through our explorations of what it means to humanize online education, we experienced what Harney and Moten describe as being "...In but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university" (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 101). This tension was most evident to us in our attempts to craft a more humanizing approach to grades, which can be inherently dehumanizing. Friction also emerged with and among our students when interrogating the school-to-prison pipeline, and in exploring Black power and radical imagination. These discussions highlighted the power of dominant narratives that are steeped in narrow perceptions of justice and morality from a white gaze. We approached these disagreements with compassion but also challenged student perceptions. Still, navigating conflicts between student ideologies and our established principles created spaces of struggle for us as course designers and facilitators.

Throughout the course, we often paused to critically reflect on our practices in order to recognize when we defaulted to dehumanizing teaching methods, such as dismissing student responses as 'wrong' or offering harsh critiques of student submissions. Counteracting these behaviors within ourselves was especially challenging during instances when student comments dehumanized our own existence. Race-based deficit narratives surfaced on a few occasions in our student's grappling with course materials. In responding to these comments, we needed to tread carefully so as not to in turn dehumanize our students. This experience compelled us to heed Audre Lorde's wisdom that self-care is a

political act and take measures to establish boundaries in our roles as course facilitators. Although we actively worked toward centering non-dominant narratives (through course materials) in order to complicate our worldview, our function was not to convince students of a particular truth, but rather to propel them on their own journeys in confronting and grappling with multiple truths. Demarcating our role as facilitators in this way, enabled us to step away from unproductive debates, which are steeped in the trappings of binary thinking (e.g. right-vs-wrong; good-vs-bad). For example, a student once began an exchange of comments that led to debating the existence of white supremacy - while we could have continually countered each other's arguments, this framing would have moved us away from relationality and into a dominant framing of proving you're right at the expense of dialogue. In such moments we instead pivoted to posing critical questions, which helped us stay in discourse while challenging narratives of dominance in a scholarly manner. Thus, self-care as enacted through stepping away, living in questions, and taking time to respond, supported our humanizing pedagogy.

Conclusions

Applying Freire's humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 2000) in our online learning space revealed glimpses of what liberated education futures might look and feel like. Humanization, like liberation, is a process we must continually (and collectively) grapple with and work toward. In our course, we engaged with this process through:

- Relational learning to co-create pathways toward our collective liberation, with the world and with each other;

- Compassionate policies to ensure love is centered in our work together so we might move with trust, faith, hope, and courage; and

- Critical reflection to recognize and actively transform oppressive structures.

Relationships were at the heart of our pedagogy. We intentionally structured a course environment where we as facilitators could learn alongside our students through authentic discourse. Our compassionate and intentional policies and language helped create conditions for learning with joy, as a community of conscience. While the necessity of these approaches is not limited to an online learning environment, we found that, within a virtual classroom, explicitly drawing attention to and actively practicing these guides allowed us to better recognize and honor our collective humanity; to see beyond the binary codes of our online personas. Critically reflecting on being situated among predominantly white faculty and student populations, unveiled how embracing our fully human, intersectional identities as women of color scholars was itself a humanizing act. By recognizing the historically oppressive systems that minoritized our existence in the academy, we actively transformed our scholarly location in claiming our right to be there. Engaging students in a similar reflective process, paved the way for authentic and relational dialogue so as to work toward resolving the teacher-student contradiction, by embracing students as co-teachers and viewing ourselves as co-learners alongside them.

This course provided us an opportunity to experience the complete life cycle of an online course, from its design through to course facilitation and student engagement. Occupying both the designer and instructor roles in this course enabled us to view this process from a unique perspective. In addition, Tinukwa Boulder's background in instructional design and Beatrice Dias' experience with community engagement complemented each other really well within an online learning environment. A more common scenario in virtual education is an instructional designer using existing material (perhaps from an in-person course) and creating an online course, which is handed off to the course instructor. This transactional relationship can often be fraught with challenges in relation to communication (Cestone, Belt, & Kulo, 2021) and power dynamics (Chen & Carliner, 2020). In our effort to humanize online learning, we essentially blurred the lines between instructional designer and faculty member, and most notably were aligned in the values we wanted to honor through the course. Perhaps we might consider applying Freire's teacher-student concept to an instructional design context, and explore how the designer-instructor binary can be similarly transitional rather than transactional. Another critical aspect of our pedagogy was the professional humility with which we approached our respective roles. By disrupting notions of expertise, we were able to actively learn with and from each other as co-designers and co-

facilitators of the course. Such a dynamic might be more challenging for most higher education designer-instructor pairs, given the significant power differential between designers who are often staff and instructors who are faculty members (Chen & Carliner, 2020). However, if we could move beyond the rigidity with which these roles are demarcated, we might be able to focus on the collective learning experience, regardless of ego, expertise, and title. Finally, although our study revealed insights into how we might grow our practice as faculty and instructional designers, this work was limited in terms of gauging student insights on the specific elements of the course. As we continue to grapple with what it means to be fully human within an online learning environment, we hope to further engage students in our ongoing conversation.

Centering humanization within an online learning environment also revealed opportunities for dismantling oppressive, dehumanizing practices in education, overall. In most cases, our online classroom structures are fashioned after traditional, in-person models of schooling. The lessons we learned from interrogating and intervening in our online learning space may offer new pathways for designing virtual classrooms, fashioned instead on Freirean humanizing pedagogies. If we simply recreate oppressive structures from the physical world and embed them in the virtual world, we will inevitably replicate and perhaps even exacerbate dehumanization in education. As online learning becomes more of a norm in society, it is imperative that we, as instructional designers and educators of conscience, ensure our visions for dialogic and generative humanizing learning environments are incorporated into virtual classroom blueprints. We hope our work adds to the growing constellation of scholarly efforts to dream into being the many possibilities for our collective, liberated, online learning futures.

"Freedom is not an ideal located outside of [an individual person]; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (Freire, 2000, p. 47).

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