


Humanizing with Humility: The Challenge of Creating Caring, Compassionate, and Hopeful Educational Spaces in Higher Education

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Abstract

Leading with care and compassion, critically reflecting on our teaching practices, and collaboration has always been central to our pedagogical practices. Participating in the #ONHumanLearn project, an initiative designed to humanize learning in higher education, we began to notice a growing divide between our engaged and disengaged students. As we learned/unlearned/relearned to take our professional practice one step further, we started to notice our own sense of powerlessness intensify alongside feelings of fatigue and frustration for our inability to reach the disengaged. We wondered what we could be doing differently to reach them. As we reflect on the process, we humbly accept that leading with care also means caring for ourselves, and that any initiative working to humanize higher learning ought to firmly embed and embody co-learning as a relational and reciprocal approach. In this paper we pay attention to inequities that became more apparent or were created as we sought to humanize education, the opportunities we have found, and our developing awareness of what is needed to sustain change.

Keywords: care engagement sustainability change education humanizing



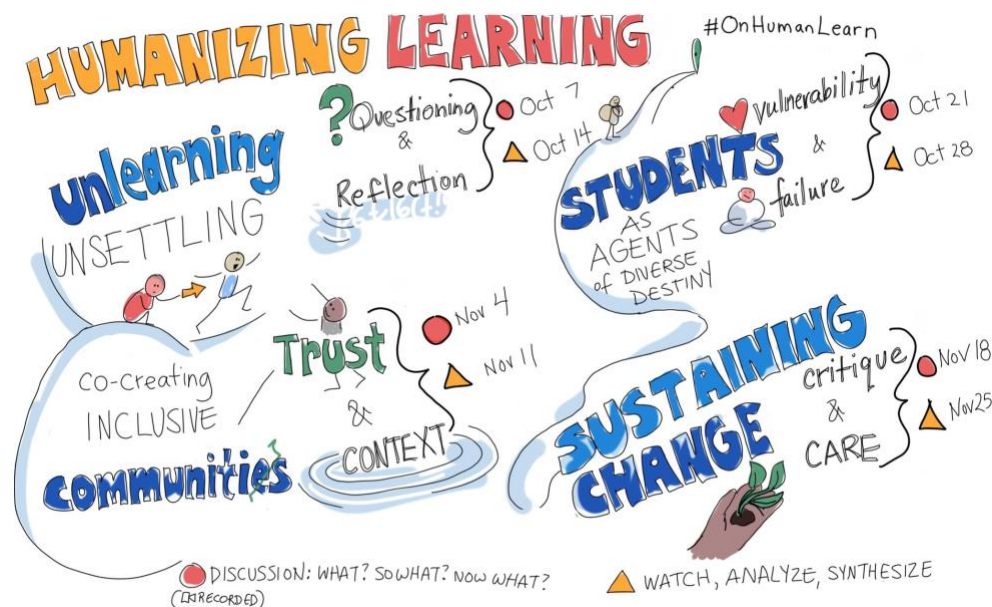
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Setting the Context: Introducing Our Inquiry

This past fall, we participated in a multi-institutional initiative designed to humanize learning in higher education as part of the #ONHumanLearn project (Spence, Rawle, Hilditch, & Treviranus, 2022). Representatives from Ontario universities and colleges including educators, researchers, and students met virtually over a period of eight weeks. We encourage you to [learn more about the #ONHumanLearn project details and the resulting pressbook](#). As captured in Figure 1, our weekly conversations invited us to unlearn and unsettle through questioning and reflection; to consider our students as agents of diverse destinies within the context of both vulnerability and failure; to envision co-creating inclusive communities grounded in trust and context; and to envision ways to sustain change by balancing critique and care. The conversations in our groups were exhilarating and challenging, but also laden with theories and concepts that were close to our hearts as educators. On multiple occasions, we turned to reflections and musings about the disengaged, the ones we really needed to reach.

Figure 1

Humanizing Learning



Note: This graphic was produced by Forsythe (2021) to visually represent the Humanizing Learning initiative. It is reproduced here with permission.

This paper captures our conversations and reflective narratives as teacher educators involved in the #ONHumanLearn project within the context of our Fall semester virtual courses. In the spirit of critique and care, we unsettle the assumption that this is just the work of educators; while we are in control of course design, teaching, and assessment, the real work of humanizing needs to be both relational and reciprocal. Educators are human too, and therefore, a humanizing model needs to dispel the traditional hierarchy and power structure, gesturing toward an approach that places responsibility for humanizing (and all its components) on both educator and student. *We, therefore, humbly suggest that in the implementation phases, educators need to view*

themselves as situated alongside students, recognizing collaboratively that humanizing learning is not something that educators can do on their own.

Who We Are and What We Do

As reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983), we have spent many years strengthening our courage to teach (Palmer, 1997), sustaining an ethics of care (Noddings, 1984), willingly transgressing to teach (hooks, 1994), and reaching for

an education that embraces every dimension of what it means to be human, that honours the varieties of human experience, looks at us and our world through a variety of cultural lenses, and educates our young people in ways that enable them to face the challenges of our time. (Palmer, 2010, p. 20)

We come to this journey as an experienced educator (Michelann with over 25 years of experience at elementary and post-secondary panels) and novice educator (Sarah with a little over five years post-secondary teaching experience). Our journeys and relationships intertwined years ago as mentor and mentee in our PhD program. We now consider ourselves colleagues and have spent years, individually and collectively, immersed in the field of educational sustainability forging an understanding that education is a multifaceted, lifewide, lifelong, and relational process that begins and ends with the individual as both learner and teacher. Through the years, we have supported and sustained each other's beliefs that we are what we do; that "Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning" (Freire, 2000, p. 31); and that "each person is, fundamentally, his or her own teacher and that learning is connected to the individual's life process" (Tanaka, 2016, p. xvi).

During the pandemic, we joined Nipissing University's book clubs, embracing a teaching manifesto of radical hope (Gannon, 2020), advancing our virtual teaching, and creating equity-based digital learning environments (Kelly & Zakrajsek, 2021; Pacansky-Brock, 2020). Yet, we were compelled to do more; so, when we were offered an initiative (the #ONHumanLearn project) that took us beyond the walls of our own virtual and physical campus, we counted ourselves in, aiming to take our professional practice one step further, and to offer an additional layer of critical self-reflection and active hope (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). The following narratives describe how we collaboratively explored the craft of university teaching (Lindsay, 2018), engaged in reflective practice (Schön, 1983), and considered humanizing practices within the context of the courses we were teaching.

Michelann's Narrative: A Case in Proactive and Inclusive Classroom Management

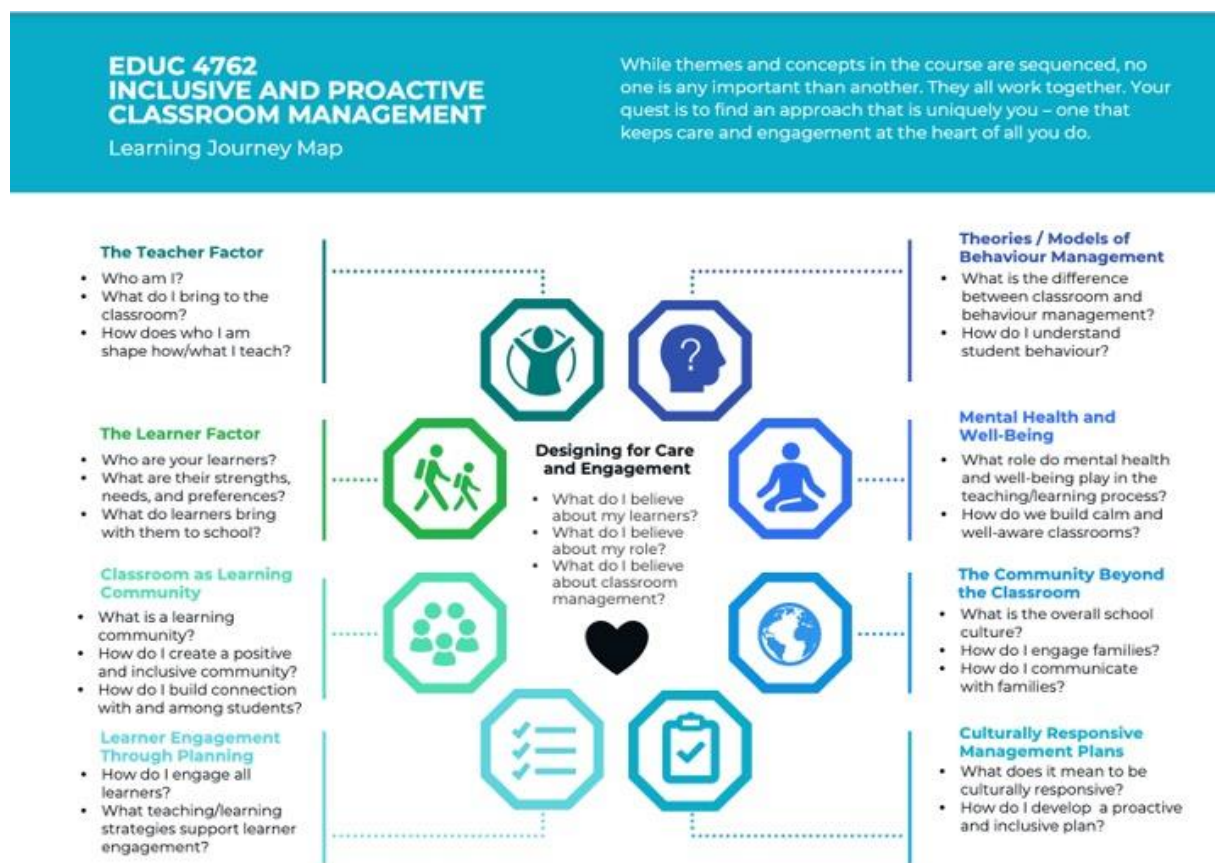
As a professor, I am not overstating when I say that everything I learned about education, I first encountered in a kindergarten classroom some thirty years ago. Adopting a stance of lifelong learning and in recognition of a changing world, I continue to expand my repertoire of strategies, always with the goal of meeting students where they are and helping them to grow at the edge of their comfort zones with the support of a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky 1978).

Humanizing education when classes were virtual, synchronous sessions were optional, and as faculty, we were never quite sure that we shared the same space as our students was no easy feat (not to mention internet disruptions, power outages, etc.). Accepting the challenge to care

and humanize became my guiding force. From the initial stages of planning, I adopted a stance of radical hope (Gannon, 2020). I understood that my syllabus would be the first impression students would have, and I endeavoured to make it worth reading. I was intentional about the choices I was making, the way I viewed the course, and the spaces I was creating for engagement and transformation. I aimed to intrigue and excite students by offering my philosophy of classroom management for the course; a continuum of student engagement; and assessment and evaluation options that valued both process and product. Our journey was composed of nine stops (one per week), each with their own focus, set of questions, and corresponding resources (see Figure 2), an explicit attempt to honour their experiences (teaching and pandemic-related), help them view the world through a variety of cultural lenses, and enable them to face a range of challenges they may encounter in the classroom.

Figure 2

The Journey

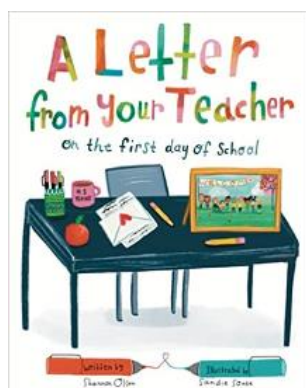


In addition to sharing the syllabus prior to the first class, I sent students “A Letter From Your Professor” adapted from Shannon Olsen’s picture book *A Letter From Your Teacher* (see Figure 3: left inset), inviting them into the experience of the course; I followed up by sending a virtual survival kit in the hopes of showing teacher candidates that they were seen and cared for, attempting a little bit of humour and lightheartedness to whet their appetites and pique their

interest (see Figure 3: right inset). With care, I culled my text encounters, ensured a balance between professional and practice-based texts, and supplemented with publicly available videos and research talks for those for whom reading was not a strong point or a preference.

Figure 3

Pre-Course Invitations to Engage

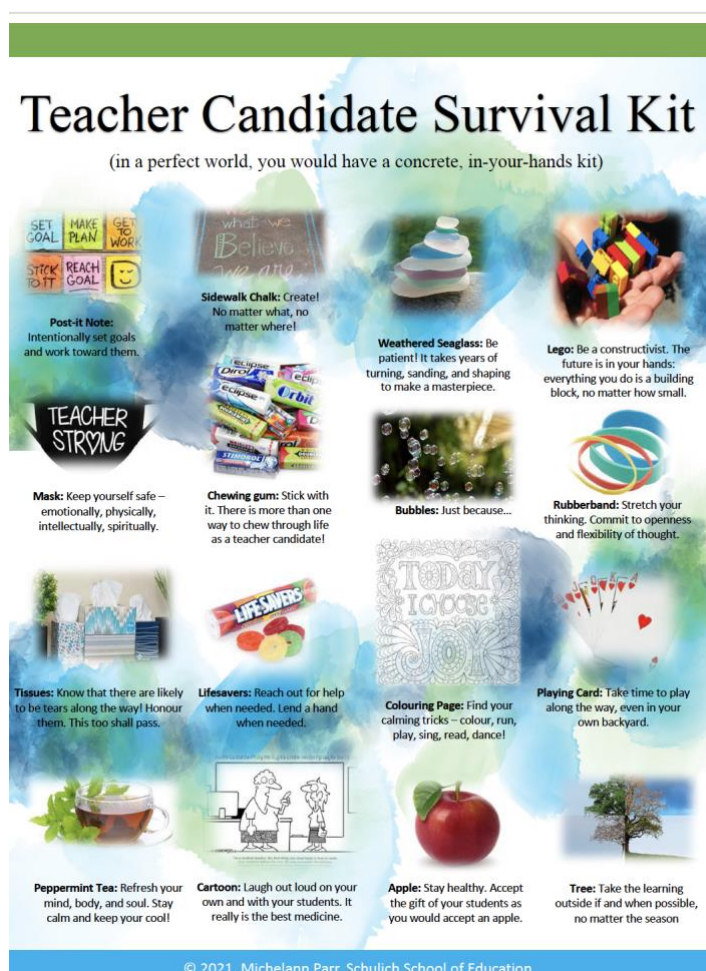


A Letter from your Professor as We Get Ready for the First Day of Teacher Education

(originally written by Shannon Olsen with a few minor adaptations for you)

*I will celebrate with you
When you have exciting news
Like, "I got my placement!"
Or, "I figured out the clues!"*

*I'm here so you can learn
A lot of theory, style, and planning.
I'll help you with your management
And all the needs you will be scanning.*



My expectations for self as facilitator and my weekly list of to-dos (from beginning to end) were not inconsequential (see Figure 4). Operating from a position of active and radical hope, I acted on the belief that “every one of our students can succeed in accomplishing what our courses ask of them” (Gannon, 2020, p. 36). And so, I ticked off the boxes each week knowing that routine, structure, and organization freed students to do the real work of learning; it was not necessary for them to spend copious amounts of time tracking down necessary files, resources, and collegial discourses. I didn’t require them to turn on their cameras or even to speak out loud. I did, however, invite engagement in many ways. The chat stream was wide open, students could react using buttons, they could opt to speak, and in response to students not wanting to be identified in a public space, I soon adopted Mentimeter for anonymity.

In my interactions with students, I endeavoured to embody my primary philosophical stance: Never ask students to do something you are not willing to do, and so I engaged in openness and curiosity, accepting that I was not there... yet. As I encouraged my students, I continually asked myself, "Would I want to be a student in this class?" And following the advice I offered students, I took time each week to schedule in self-care: yoga, a walk, games with my grandkids, watching a sunset. Through all of this though, I felt the sting of students who chose not to engage, not to fall in love with the content and the course that I had so caringly designed, to barely even respond when I reached out and asked, "I noticed you didn't respond. How can I help?" I was determined to resist the urge (not well, I might say) to draw the conclusion that there were a group of students capitalizing on the pandemic who were doing the bare minimum and purchasing their degrees; a cynical thought I know, but this line of thinking let me off the hook a little and on some days was a comfort. Ultimately, "When faced with the choice between compassion and being a hard-ass," I chose compassion, aiming to build, and modelling for future teachers how "to build a future radically different from our present" (Gannon, 2020, p. 37). Ironically, I did not make the same choice for myself, instead adopting a hard-ass stance that propelled me to do even more.

Figure 4

Weekly To-Do List

- Be physically present at least a half hour prior to, and following, each two-hour class. Be physically present on camera each class, live not recorded.
 - Check in early and often with students, keeping an ongoing list of those whose work was left incomplete or who did not meet the weekly attendance requirements.
 - Plan special events (e.g., Hat day) to follow a more normalized academic year.
 - Organize google classroom in a way that frees students up for the real learning - common headings, structures, and language.
 - Post all resources necessary for successful encounters with course content.
 - Implement a common format in all classes that not only included critical content, but wove in movie clips designed to humanize content; guest speakers to offer alternate perspectives (live and online); picture books that shortcutted the content and were easily transferable into the classroom; online platforms (each of which I learned prior to trying with students) such as Mentimeter, Kahoot! Quizziz, Google Docs, Flipgrid, Breakout rooms.
 - Embed a wellness arrival practice, check-in, self-care/mindful moment, and ticket out the door that not only engages students but models how it might be done in the classroom.
 - Encourage and recognize student self-report for self-care each week as a natural extension of our in-class self-care moments.
 - Ensure that in-class activities are balanced in terms of multiple intelligences and learning styles.
 - Ensure that weekly google form offers a range of engagement and accountability activities that respond to diverse ways of being and multiple intelligences AND satisfy my need to ensure that students are taking course content seriously.
 - Post a to-do list each week reminding students of essential weekly components (a bonus set of marks!).
 - Reward process as well as product, supporting students as they built their management portfolios throughout the semester.
 - Reward active engagement in class with hints and cues for Google Form.
 - Offer level up activities for students interested in enhancing their mark or extending their level of engagement beyond the course syllabus (a nod to engagement-based grading).
 - After the second class of each week, post YouTube and Google Meet videos, Otter transcripts, and Google Slides.
 - Respond to students within 24 hours, making adjustments and reposting as necessary.
-

Sarah's Narrative: A Case in Cultivating a Caring Literacy Classroom

I am not a 'schooled' teacher, that is to say, I do not have formal teacher qualifications. So, when I entered my first teacher education course, I felt uncertain, unsure, and uneasy. Adopting a beginner's mindset and relational approach to teaching and learning, I looked for more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978) who could nudge me to the edge of my comfort zones, and beyond, while simultaneously meeting me where I was. I knew the power of this approach having worked closely with Michelann during my doctoral work, who taught me the importance of leading with care, compassion, and a critical imagination. The more I settled into my new instructor role, the more I realized Michelann's approach was there all along; a natural extension of my personal and professional identities, and my own being and becoming, reaffirming the significance of relationships as the foundation for teaching and learning. My PhD research in a Grade 6 classroom, with the guidance of Michelann, taught me that teaching and learning are about human connection, and developing real relationships with learners. Without that foundational relationship, truly transformative learning cannot occur (see Driessens, 2018).

I have always considered myself a caring educator. I am flexible and responsive to learner needs, I offer multiple entry points into course content, and I invite learners to demonstrate their understanding and growth through a variety of evaluation options. Following the "great onlining of 2020" (Siemens as cited in Noffs, 2020), I accepted the challenge of translating my caring approach into an online, primarily asynchronous modality. I wholeheartedly shared in the journey of my learners as we experienced our own individual and collective *being* and *becoming*. From beginning to end, the course was wrapped in care and compassion. I opened the course with a read aloud of *I Am Human* by Susan Verde and Peter H. Reynolds, inviting students to connect the book to course themes of learning alongside each other, critical self-reflection, teaching for social justice, the relational nature of teaching and learning, and care being at the heart of all we do as educators. I closed the course with a read aloud of *The Three Questions* by Jon J. Muth reminding students that, "there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side."

In September, and again in January, I frontloaded course content so that, as learners entered each semester, they had the option to dip and dive into the content at their own pace. I offered structure and routine through weekly emails and to-do lists; sample assignments and evaluation rubrics; print and video-based instructions; graphic organizers to guide their thinking; embedded Padlets so they could pose questions and interact with each other; and designed a thoughtfully crafted course website wrapped in care (e.g., bonus assignment related to practicing self-care) and presence (e.g., posting a bio and photograph) that would engage the 21st century learner (see Figure 5).

I felt as though I met all the criteria for an engaging, humanizing, inclusive, and equitable online course (Pacansky-Brock, 2020). I developed trusting relationships with my learners; I was present on-and offline; I was deeply empathetic; I used trauma-informed practices; I learned about my students; and I empowered them throughout the course, so they felt visible, seen, and valued. I knew what I was supposed to do, and I did it, to the best of my ability. But I still couldn't reach them all.

Figure 5

Designing a Caring and Compassionate Course

Meet Your Instructor

Dr. Sarah Driessens

I am a Mother, Educator, Researcher, Activist, and Bibliophile. I am also the Manager of Learning for Rippling University. I use shelter pronouns.

My research focuses on critical literacy and social justice education, specifically how these pedagogical lenses can be utilized to shift our understanding and focus of literacy practices, strategies, instruction, and perceptions.

My teaching philosophy is grounded in the following principles:

- "Education is the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." ~ Paulo Freire
- "Empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks." ~ Jeff Hooke
- "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." ~ Maya Angelou

Contact Info

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Welcome to Module 2! This module spans three weeks from January 9th to January 29th. The week-to-week breakdown is as follows:

- Week #11 - January 9-14th (Synchronous Session)
- Week #12 - January 16- 22nd (PLC)
- Week #13 - January 23-29th (Synchronous Session)

We have outlined your weekly tasks below. Alternatively, you can click [this](#) [link](#) to read the same information in a Google Doc.

The overall learning goals for this module include:

- Recognizing the "reading wars" (i.e., phonics vs. whole language approaches) are not an either/or approach, but there is room in a comprehensive and balanced literacy program for both.
- Develop an understanding of the different perspectives on reading including bottom-up, top-down, interactive, and social constructivist approaches.
- Dive deeper into balanced literacy instruction including the gradual release of responsibility in relation to reading (modelled, shared, guided, and independent).
- Explore different reading assessments that you might use in your classroom.

Please use the following Padlet to post your questions from this week.

Module 4 Questions

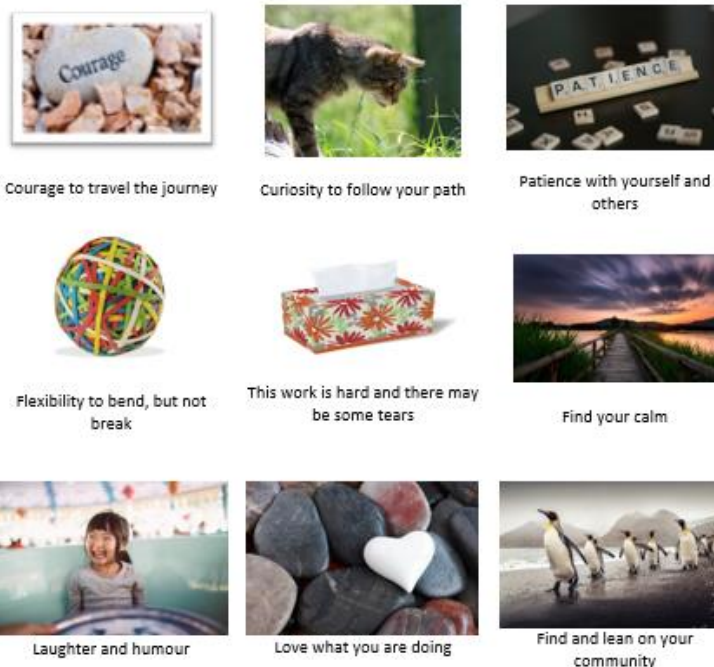
Please use the following Padlet to post your questions about Module 4.

Regardless of my caring approach, I had to send reminder emails to check up on students who failed to submit an assignment; I delivered synchronous classes to a sea of 'black Zoom squares' rather than human faces; I had students log onto Zoom only to wander off from their computer and me sending them to the waiting room once class had ended (after several attempts to connect with them). I hustled to engage these seemingly disengaged students and still, despite all my efforts, I could not reach them. I felt tired, defeated, and powerless.

As a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), I needed to answer this question: *What lenses or mindsets do I need to sustain a humanistic approach to teaching and learning?* Inspired by Michelann's "Teacher Candidate Survival Kit," I created my own "Humanizing Learning Survival Kit" (see Figure 6) as both a reminder of where I have been and where I am going. Doing so allowed me to 'get underneath the hood' of humanizing education and how I could reframe my caring approach as I reached in and give myself permission to practice self-compassion, self-love, and self-care; I was finally able to turn to myself and say, "You gave it your best shot. You are enough."

Figure 6*Humanizing Learning Survival Kit*

Humanizing Learning Survival Kit

**Reframing Our Experiences Through Relational Care and Humility**

We have come to understand that a humanizing approach can only be fully realized through and in relation with other humans willing to connect and engage with us and when we are willing to reach out to reach in. We, therefore, became connections for each other, sounding boards, and we commiserated in an effort to let ourselves off the hook and not take ourselves quite so seriously. Here, we came to realize that we can't do this work alone. And we shouldn't be expected to. It takes a village to raise a child and an entire educational system to humanize education. Change needs to begin from the top-down and the bottom-up as well as emanating from the middle, which is, ultimately, where educators are situated: somewhere between students and what they bring to the experience and the traditional structures and practices of higher education that often bind us to particular ways of being, with or without our say-so.

Reframing our experience through reciprocal care and humility, we realize that our exhaustion wasn't necessarily exacerbated by all the boxes we were trying to tick or the balls we were trying to juggle (full- and part-time work, mothers and grandmothers with young children, working from home, COVID-19, etc.), but rather the urge to figure out ways to motivate our disengaged teacher candidates, knowing that they are the future of education as we know it. We wanted so desperately to reach them, to help them fall in love with teaching the way we did. But no matter how hard we tried, how much care we extended, the unreachable remained, and our care was not good enough for them in this particular time and space, and this we tended to take personally.

We questioned whether this seeming disengagement was an inevitable byproduct of virtual spaces, but eventually came to understand that the choice to engage is ubiquitous: there will always be students who may be physically present, but absent in the ways that count most or at least the ways we were measuring. In cases such as these, we are not failing the students; students are choosing not to find the content useful, interesting, or worth their time and energy. Sometimes the most human thing to do is allow students to fail faster to succeed sooner. This does not mean that they will succeed in our programs sooner, but instead that failing in the program might prompt them to explore their lifelong and lifewide passions sooner. This, we have come to understand, is a vulnerable conversation that we must have with students, perhaps at the beginning of each of the courses we teach; we need to share our stories of experience, which gives permission for us to be human together (Ginright, 2022a). Perhaps it is less an issue of (dis)engagement than it is understanding the terms of engagement both teacher and student bring to the teaching-learning experience. Perhaps as we embark on yet another round of course preparation, some of the answers to our questions can be found in open-licensed resources such as *Humanizing Learning: A Student-Generated Framework* (Walem, 2022) and *The Seven C's of Learning Design* (Conole, 2015).

Returning full circle to where we began (see Figure 1), we have come to realize that the missing piece, the “pivot in how we think, connect, act, and work . . . [that] braids together what we know with how we feel and who we wish to be” (Ginwright, 2022b, p.16), is reciprocal care and compassion within a context of healing and vulnerability (Brown, 2017). While we talked about being human and empathy, perhaps we failed to make the connection to social empathy, that which humanizes each other, ultimately developing “a shared understanding of our reciprocal responsibilities to one another” (Santone, 2019, p. 117). Referencing the work of McClintock, Palmer (2010) suggests that “we can know a relational reality only by being in relation to it - not keeping our distance... but moving close and leaning in” (p. 28). As the Humanizing Project concluded, we settled into a relational, healing, and vulnerable space, realizing that we did not stand alone (Brown, 2017) and that we needed others who shared the same questions and motivations. Sustaining change means that we need to share our frustrations and struggles alongside our hopes and dreams not just for our students but for ourselves as well. *It is here that we came to understand that humanizing our educational spaces is not just something we can plan for our students, but is instead, something we need to negotiate with students.*

By nature of its very being, humanizing requires engagement of students; it is a shift away from the traditional and it will take time. We need buy-in from students, from our institutions, and from our governing bodies. There needs to be a willingness to step away from the power-laden structures of contemporary education, and students, faculty, and administration need vulnerable spaces to struggle, to fail, and to succeed - a tall order in the context of performance-based funding. The conversation that needs to be opened is an intensely vulnerable one that is at once relational, caring, and informative; one that offers our experiences with engagement as a context for discussion, hope, exploration, and sustainable change, and one that challenges our students to see beyond the personal and present toward the social, the global, and the future. Who do we (meaning students, faculty, institutions etc.) ultimately want to be when we grow up?

Like Tanaka (2016), we arrive at the end of our inquiry with more questions than we have answers: “How will we nurture our souls so that we can heed the call of our learning spirits? And

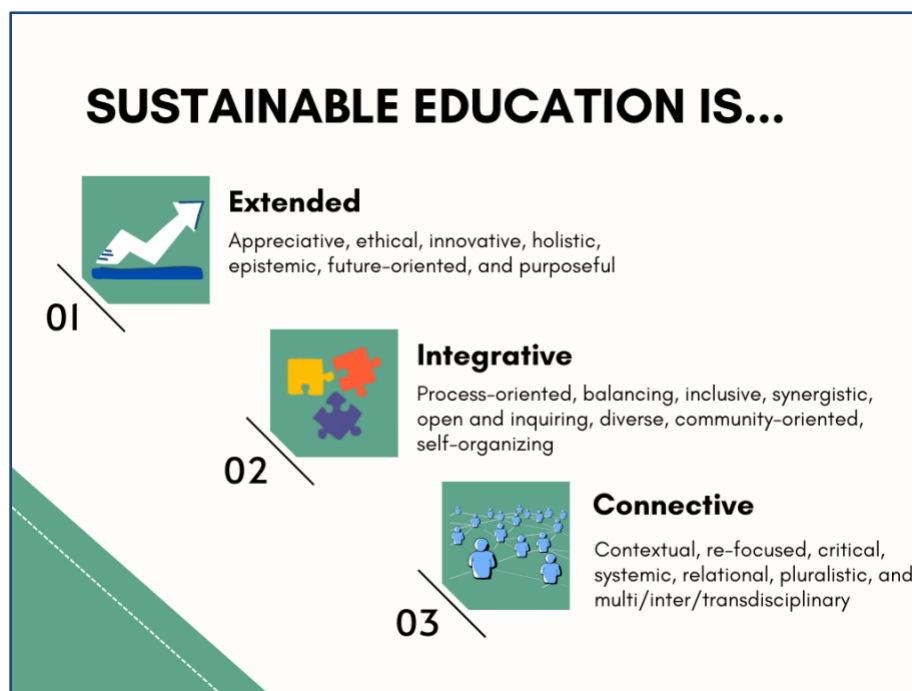
finally, what is the purpose of education, and can curricula be designed to address our deep and nuanced need?" (p. 210). Recognizing that we are always in process of being and becoming, and that we possess the courage and hope required to teach, we push "past the inertia and fear of experimentation that has kept too much of academic culture frozen in pedagogical practices that are out of phase with what we now understand about the nature of reality and the dynamics of knowing" (Palmer, 2010, p. 29). We accept that "We are what we do," and we make a conscious decision to turn our humanizing lens inward and remind ourselves that we are not superhuman, and as much as we would hope for it to be different, our care as educators will never override students' engagement choices. At the end of the day, what we can do is declare our relationality, share our stance of vulnerability and thought processes with students, support students as more knowledgeable others, and hope that they develop a cultivated and practiced openness to what we have to teach (Tanaka, 2016).

Sustaining Our Humanizing Practice

Sustaining positive change and humanizing higher education is not something we can do on our own; this requires ongoing conversations that extend far beyond the personal and local of our classrooms and individual institutions to the broader social, global, and future contexts of education, such as that offered by the #ONHumanLearn project. As we take a backward glance at the work we have done and the changes we have made in an effort to humanize education, we draw on Sterling's (2001) image of sustainable education (please see Figure 7) to ground who we are, where we have been, and where we are going on our individual and collective journeys.

Figure 7

Sterling's (2001) Image of Sustainable Education



Sterling (2001) reminds us that our critical and relational approach to teaching and learning, the transdisciplinary nature of our courses, and our balanced approach to appreciate that, at the end of the day, we have done enough. Today, we find that our commitment to students and humanizing education are sustainable and worth the effort, provided that we care for ourselves in order to care for others. As a final gesture of care for ourselves, for each other, and for those who wish to, or already do, share this journey, we use Sterling's image of sustainable education to construct a letter from the future to a humanizing educator from a student of the future (see Figure 8). If you are reading this paper, you have taken the first step with us, and it will be more than worth the effort.

Hopeful and Human Parting Thoughts

No matter what, our job as educators is to support students as they find a life of meaning and purpose, discover the complex web that is our world, and find their place in it (Katz, 2018). While we can empathize with our students and contextualize their experiences in what is going on in the world, ultimately choices have consequences; there are standards to be met, expectations to be accomplished, and regulations to be fulfilled for now and for the future. Our care extends far beyond the personal and present of the teacher candidate sitting in front of us to the many students of the future; this is the responsibility we accept as pre-service teacher educators, and it is perhaps the greatest weight we carry.

In the end, we accept that no matter who we didn't reach, we had done enough. We reached in and we reached out; in that, we are enough. We are human too. With radical hope, we heal and release the burden of exhaustion, looking toward a transformed and sustainable future in our higher education spaces for us, for our students, and for their future students. Moving forward with intention, gratitude, and care, we come to understand that our students make us teachers, and the best of who we are as teachers is grounded in who we are as learners. For the opportunity to teach and learn, we are truly privileged and grateful.

Figure 8

Letter from the Future

Dear Humanizing Educator,

From the moment I entered your classroom, I could tell that you believed that education extended far beyond your course. I felt so appreciated and valued as did many others in my cohort. You ensured that all who wanted to be included were included, in all areas of life, and throughout their lifetimes; we could tell that you valued personal and local knowledge as foundational to learning. In the stories you told, you showed your personal code of ethics, shifting the boundaries of care and concern from the personal and the present, to the social, environmental, future: all our relations. Your pedagogical practices were creative, pushing us to pursue new ways of thinking about our practice and other fields related to education. You encouraged curiosity, imagination, enthusiasm, and explicitly valued our holistic needs. Thank you for drawing our attention to self-care as a requirement for caring for others; we sometimes forget. As we explored our assumptions, worldviews, core values, you reminded us gently to review them on an ongoing basis. Even when we weren't future-oriented, you carried that weight for us, always concerned with our future students and creating a more sustainable future for all.

Every class, you did your best to make our learning interesting by connecting to life outside our

traditional 'schooled' spaces; you kept us grounded in the real world and helped us to realize that the spaces of education are diverse and ever-changing. I'll admit that we weren't always receptive to these ideas; we just wanted the recipe and set of operating instructions. But you continually re-focused our curricula and made links to social and community development, human and natural ecology, equity and diversity, present and future, as well as practical skills for sustainable teaching, learning, and living. "How we do some things is how we do everything," you said. Today, I am more critical, ideologically aware, deconstructive, and constructive, recognizing that education is systemic and we need to be attentive to its systems, relationships, and patterns. I can no longer turn this critical lens off.

Relationality has become a way of being for me; I now connect education and schooling to the local-global, past-present-future, personal-social, environmental-economic, human-natural, micro-macro. I am open to different ways of knowing, and I resist disciplinary borders and seek multiple ways of looking at educational challenges. I have come to understand education as process and product, as art and science, as curiosity and creativity. I have become process-oriented with a small dose of product (just like you modelled). I loved the invitations to engage, and construct meaning in a variety of ways, although I'll admit that in the beginning, your course design and curriculum was overwhelming, and I didn't quite know where to begin. I didn't know what to do in this co-created, emergent, and self-responsible space. I appreciated the weekly checklists but have come to understand that this is far bigger than just checking off boxes! You worked hard to build autonomy and embrace diverse ways of knowing; I now understand this as inclusion: an effort to balance cognitive with affective, objective with subjective, material with spiritual, personal with collective, mind with body.

I so often think that I did not formally thank you for the time and effort you put into our journeys. You met us where we were at, which is something I had not experienced before. Today, I want you to know that I recognize that the work of humanizing education is tough. I am now a strong and courageous educator who knows when to be vulnerable, when to push through, and when to accept that what I have done is enough; I am enough. Like you, I am at ease with ambiguity, uncertainty, and willing to embrace failure as an act of growth. I accept that sustainable educational change takes time, and I am happy to report that I am not alone in taking up the personal, local, institutional, political, and global challenges.


Your strengths-based approach of propelling teachers into the world who are confident, critically aware, and ready to do the hard work of changing the world is an incredible legacy that will always inspire me.


With care,
A Former Student from the Future

Authors' Contributions

Authorship is equal in this paper.

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We strive to follow intent with action and make equity, diversity, and inclusion foundational components of our teaching, educational leadership, and learning practice. We can and will use decolonization and anti-colonization as primary frameworks in our disparate and diverse roles. We acknowledge the unmistakable power hierarchies as we operate on colonized lands and so, we also acknowledge that it is our responsibility to not only avoid perpetuating colonial structures, but to also uphold anti-colonial structures and decolonize our teaching and learning. (Walem, 2022)

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Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

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