

Building *Nepantla*: Humanizing Pedagogies and the Learning Sciences

Irene H. Yoon (chair), The University of Utah, irene.yoon@utah.edu
Patricia Buenrostro, Lake Forest College, pbuenrostro@lakeforest.edu
Grace A. Chen, Vanderbilt University, grace.a.chen@vanderbilt.edu
Addie Shrodes, Northwestern University, ashrodes@u.northwestern.edu
Suraj Uttamchandani, Indiana University, suttamch@indiana.edu
Susan Jurow (discussant), University of Colorado Boulder, susan.jurow@colorado.edu

Abstract: Humanization is undefinable in a generative sense, with possibilities of *Nepantla* (Anzaldúa, 2015)—a space to prompt further development of anti-oppressive theorizing and research in the learning sciences. In this symposium, humanizing pedagogies are conceptualized and represented vis-à-vis video study as a vehicle for teachers’ re-imagining their classrooms and relationships with students (Buenrostro); multiplicities in teachers’ self-making through relationship-building with students (Chen); pedagogies related to humor (Shrodes) and desired futures (Uttamchandani) among LGBTQ+ youth who are makers and knowers in out-of-school spaces; and haunted present-pasts in a school community that is bridging institutional exclusion of students of color with disabilities (Yoon). These papers engage learning sciences theories and research methods such as teachers’ video analysis, design partnerships, consequential learning, and histories in person. Thus, the symposium convenes a dialogue about humanizing pedagogies across settings and disciplines with an intergenerational panel of scholars with diverse race, gender, sexuality, and disability identities.

Introduction

Humanizing pedagogies are approaches to teaching that critique the role of schooling in reproducing narrow boundaries around who is considered human—an ideological project that polices normative student behaviors and identities, community histories, notions of curricula and achievement, and the purpose of school-based learning. The underlying concern with students’ accessing recognition of their humanity is framed as a matter of individual, institutional, and social transformation. That is, humanizing pedagogies have politicized agendas to teach young people to love themselves, love their communities, and dismantle structures of unjust power in society.

With this common concern, numerous scholars and educators have conceptualized and practiced pedagogies that are intended to resist institutionalized dehumanization of young people—in particular students of color—which typically occurs through disproportionate and overly exclusionary discipline, emotional neglect or bullying, curricular erasure or non-presence, interactional microaggressions, and anti-Blackness. These projects of resistance have been explored with youth in both school and community settings, often through modes such as participatory action research, arts-based community projects, and affirming youth identities as fluid, complex, and critically aware of social, cultural, economic, and political power (see Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright, 2015; Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

One challenge in discussing such pedagogies and the inclusive, expansive learning environments they protect or create is that there are many variations in the names and key principles of pedagogies that center the assumption that youth from non-dominant communities and identities and their knowledges are beautiful, complicated, and have always existed, continue to evolve, and can fundamentally change what it means to be human as well as what it means to be know.

However, when people talk about “humanizing pedagogies,” they emphasize different facets of humanization from critical perspectives (Bartolomé, 1994; Camangian, 2015; Salazar, 2013). Some scholars and practitioners who use terms other than “humanizing pedagogies” adhere to exceedingly similar concepts and principles (e.g., Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2006; Paris & Alim, 2014; Patel, 2019). Others explore “humanizing” pedagogies in specific content areas (e.g., Gutierrez, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2010). Adding to the discursive confusion, some refer to humanizing pedagogies as a depoliticized humaneness rather than a systemic subversion and transformation (e.g., Ullucci, 2009). Further, scholars decry simplistic approaches that reduce culturally relevant, culturally sustaining, and humanizing pedagogies to positive teacher-student relationships and omit the call “to revitalize & transform society” (@djangoparis, 2019; see also, Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Because scholars have used varying terms, definitions, and practices, we define the broader set of frameworks as “the family of humanizing pedagogies” that retain several values, regardless of the label of the pedagogical approach: a) bridging students’ lives and identities, community histories, and formal school

curriculum by recognizing these structures of power and resisting them by retelling underground narratives that have survived attempts at institutional erasure (e.g., Patel, 2019); b) an insistence on the transformation of schooling, therefore imagining futures that subvert or reconfigure what it means to know, learn, and be a knower/learner (e.g., Yoon, 2019b); c) relationships with and respect for students as agents, knowers, and worthy decision-makers about their bodies and their learning (e.g., Camangian, 2015; Dennis, Uttamchandani, Biery, & Blauvelt, 2019); d) explicit focus on healing *and* righteous anger, justice, and community-building (e.g., Cammarota, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2009); and e) abolishing normative ideologies about fixed or single abilities, behaviors, bodies, identities, belonging, and achievement (e.g., Brockenbrough, 2015). These five values, among others, challenge theories of knowing, learning, being, as well as assumptions that time is linear and that past is past. Importantly, humanizing pedagogies are grounded in and practice radical notions of love and hope for marginalized youth and communities—who are typically economically disenfranchised and criminalized based on race, gender identity, and disability, among other axes of power (e.g., Byrne-Jiménez & Yoon, 2019; Ginwright, 2015; hooks, 1994, 2001; Love, 2019; Patel, 2019).

Synthesis of major issues

Part of the proliferation of related, kindred, but separate terms seems to be disciplinary; others are theoretical. For example, culturally sustaining pedagogies explicitly build on culturally relevant pedagogy that was initially developed in teacher education departments to support Black students. Culturally sustaining pedagogies include theorizations that relate to mixed identities, settler colonialism, and postcolonialisms. Also related to culturally relevant pedagogy “2.0” is hip hop pedagogy (Alim & Baugh, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Other scholars, who rarely cite each other, call their work critical pedagogy. These scholars have cited Freire as their roots (interestingly, few cite Apple and Giroux, though these scholars were the first to engage with Freire and coined the term critical pedagogy, despite being White, cisgender). Critical pedagogies and Freire (1970/2000) are the most directly cited sources in frameworks that utilize the name “humanizing” (e.g., Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar, 2013; Camangian, 2015). The critical pedagogies that draw on Freire also center race and racism in their critique; class oppression and economic disenfranchisement are relevant, but unlike for Freire and Apple and Giroux, they are not the primary feature. Social class oppression is connected to racism from this perspective, not the other way around. For example, models such as Camangian’s (2015) conception of humanizing pedagogy draws extensively from critical pedagogies, which are closely related to youth activism and utilize students’ real-life challenges and social contexts as sites for action research and community-based learning that are also tied to traditional core standards (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1970/2000; Ginwright, 2006). Finally, humanizing pedagogies are also involved in reconciling issues of professional learning and professional identity, particularly for teachers of color, who often find teaching to be a demoralizing and unsustainable profession in the current structures and organization of schooling (Love, 2019).

Few scholars and ideas seem to cross boundaries. Paris, who conceptualized culturally sustaining pedagogies (2012), also edited a text on humanizing research methodologies (Paris & Winn, 2014). However, humanizing pedagogies, critical pedagogies, youth activism, and culturally sustaining pedagogies seem to converge around the importance of abolishing carceral systems as tied to slavery, anti-Blackness, and capitalism; recognizing the ongoing settler colonialism of the U.S. and Canada; and reinvesting scholarly attention in dreams, love, imagination, and futures. Recently, upon adopting theories from cultural studies, disability studies, and multiplicities of feminist, Indigenous, and queer theories; educational theorists have begun to be pushed forward by fugitivities, settler colonialisms, notions of space and social geographies, affect theories, Black Futures, and intersections of race, disability, gender, and queerness (which are necessarily tied to capitalism, anti-Blackness, and whiteness; Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Dumas, 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Patel, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2018b). These are not new ideas, but rather points of connection for the interdisciplinary conversations that occur in education around pedagogies, learning, dehumanization, and injustice. As a result, despite pain and marginalization, humanization is generative and expansive, making space for undefinable possibilities.

Our intervention

Though scholars have argued for these pedagogies for several decades, they are relatively new to the learning sciences. There are several reasons that the broader family of humanizing pedagogies—and their expansion into humanizing leadership and school cultures—merit a formal conversation in the learning sciences community.

Humanizing pedagogies are attentive to interactional dynamics, community and social histories of oppression, and the fostering of relationships among students and between students and adults. Specifically, conceptualizations of humanizing pedagogies emphasize processes that learning sciences are keenly attuned to examine: everyday practices, formations and dismantlings, identities, and co-constructions of these processes and identities in time and space. Some learning sciences scholars have explicitly de-centered disciplinary norms to

recognize Indigenous knowledges, ways of knowing, and ways of developing individually and collectively (e.g., Esmonde & Booker, 2017; Espinoza & Vossoughi, 2014; Philip, Bang, & Jackson, 2018; Vossoughi, Hooper, & Escudé, 2016). Thus, we argue that they are the future of not only the learning sciences, but of our scholarly and community-based efforts against oppressive regimes.

Another reason for this symposium is to honor scholars in the learning sciences—notably, women of color—who have dedicated their bodies of work to similar values so that we may sustain and move beyond them (including, in alphabetical order, Arnetha Ball, Kris Gutiérrez, Carol D. Lee, Na'ilah Suad Nasir, among others). These scholars have attended to conflict, power, histories of oppression, and the transformative “consequentiality” of creativity and agency among non-dominant communities and youth (Hall & Jurow, 2015). Their works and theoretical contributions have asserted the value and power of people, practices, and knowledges that are often relegated to “informal” or “heritage,” not “academic achievement” or “content knowledge.” The body of research that moves and has moved in this direction also incorporates how the past is unresolved in the present and is also part of our futures (Malkki, 2001).

We also offer this symposium because attention to equity has been present in the learning sciences since the beginning of the field, but it is only more recently that questions of equity have been *foregrounded* in learning sciences research and writing. That is, as the learning sciences moves increasingly *away from* power-neutral perspectives, scholars increasingly show interest in moving *toward* explicitly justice-focused, anti-racist, decolonizing perspectives (Philip et al., 2018).

Purpose of symposium

With this symposium, we do not seek to bring humanizing pedagogies into the learning sciences. Rather, we seek to challenge the learning sciences. We propose a series of presentations that illustrate how humanizing pedagogies are at the core of young people’s development, well-being, and the potential for social transformation towards justice. All the presentations in this symposium embrace and critique humanizing pedagogies and their possibilities. For example, the research base is overwhelmingly conceptual; while formidable and enriching, it is incomplete without contributions from investigations of learning, becoming, and teaching in process. The presentations in this session represent works that stem from research partnerships in everyday schooling, learning, and teaching practice.

The learning sciences have long focused on learning “in context,” but humanizing pedagogies offer ways of attuning to context at the crosshatching between large-scale social dehumanizing and day-to-day educational practice. These presentations span the layered aspects of humanizing pedagogies in learning environments from peer interactions among youth to classroom and organization-wide practices. Humanizing pedagogies are conceptualized and represented vis-à-vis video study as a vehicle for teachers’ re-imagining their classrooms and relationships with students (Buenrostro); multiplicities in teachers’ self-making through relationship-building with students (Chen); pedagogies related to humor (Shrodes) and desired futures (Uttamchandani) among LGBTQ+ youth who are makers and knowers in out-of-school spaces; and haunted present-pasts in a school community that is bridging institutional exclusion of students of color with disabilities (Yoon). These papers engage learning sciences theories and research methods such as teachers’ video analysis, design partnerships, consequential learning, and histories in person.

These presentations, therefore, take a complex worldview of shape-shifting and time-bending, being both/and powerful and marginal. These are similar to calls from Anzaldúa’s (2015) concept of *Nepantla* as a creative, spiritual, and wise place—a space to prompt further development of anti-oppressive theorizing and research in the learning sciences. The scholars in this symposium also embody what the learning sciences could be in *Nepantla*: an intergenerational group of scholars who identify with multiply marginalized communities, claiming spaces that have traditionally housed the academic “face” of the learning sciences, for whom humanizing pedagogies are personal, for whom research methodologies and theoretical frameworks of the learning sciences must be explicitly justice- and decolonization-focused projects in theory and praxis.

Presentations

The following presentations conceptualize and test connections between humanizing pedagogies and the learning sciences. They have their hearts invested in trans-disciplinary projects that make space for learning, cultural practices, and identities that are definitionally impossible.

Using video to reflect on teacher-student relationality: Re-envisioning the math classroom as a space for becoming

Patricia Buenrostro, Lake Forest College

(Re)humanizing mathematics is a recent construct taken up by scholars who aim to critique and reverse the damaging effects of mathematics experiences on learners, particularly those from marginalized communities. The hope is that a humanizing mathematics pedagogy can account for and even build on students' identities, cultural histories, and desires in ways that are consequential for learning mathematics. Humanization, a central feature of liberation pedagogy, is a "process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons" who participate in the world as subjects (Salazar, 2013). The present analysis seeks to reveal the ways in which video can support mathematics teachers to re-envision their own classrooms as places of *becoming more fully human* with a focus on teacher-student relationships.

Classroom video presents teachers with rich representations of their own classrooms highlighting their interactions with students. The resultant conversations with mathematics educators has the potential to leverage, support, and challenge the nature of teacher-student relationships. This paper presents an analysis of video data from 20+ video-based coaching sessions with urban, secondary mathematics teachers in which teachers and researcher inquired about teacher-identified problems of practice as they debriefed in hour-long sessions that were also video-taped. The findings reveal the ways in which teacher (and researcher) reflections reshaped how teachers view themselves and their students in more dialectical and humanizing terms. The author argues that this reshaping has the potential to transform teacher and student relationships in ways that are consequential for learning mathematics while also foregrounding teachers personal and political values as they explore their own teaching. Research on teacher-student relationships within the learning sciences field is woefully inadequate at best and absent altogether at worst. Because teacher-student relationships are imperative for marginalized communities, we feel that the implications of this research for the learning sciences will help center the needs of non-dominant communities in ways we have yet to see.

"A human job": Teachers' self-making subjectivities in relational work

Grace A. Chen, Vanderbilt University

Who are the mathematics teachers who attempt to recognize the complex humanity and dignity of young people in schools? What does doing this work for and with students do to and for teachers? This presentation explores how one experienced mathematics teacher—an Asian American man who grew up in the predominantly Latinx community where he has been teaching for 15 years—constructed his own humanization as a teacher while engaging in dynamic relational work with his students.

This analysis draws on data from a larger ethnographic study, including fieldnotes, audio, and video of teachers' work in collegial teams, classroom observations, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. It identifies the "incoherent subjectivities" that this teacher, Franck To, constructed as he expressed clarity, confidence, and contradictions around relating to students. As Franck constructed students as complex and agentic individuals through his reflections and interactions, he simultaneously constructed himself as also complex and agentic: making intricate choices about drawing boundaries, managing emotions, and respecting young people's self-knowledge. Franck's sensemaking shifted between accepting the limitations of his "teacherly responsibility," articulating a step-by-step approach to building relationships with students, and reflecting explicitly on his power in relation to students. He wondered about these power dynamics, the ripples of influence he did and did not have over students, and tensions in himself, his students, and their relationships in school settings. In raising and not answering such questions, Franck demonstrated both vulnerability and serenity in grappling with necessary incompleteness in both his understanding and doing of relational work.

Although researchers and practitioners resoundingly agree that student-teacher relationships are important for students who are marginalized by US school systems—especially in subjects like mathematics—most of the literature focuses on practical advice rather than the sensemaking and self-making that underlies teachers' relational work. Similarly, the humanizing pedagogies literature generally centers on the ways that teachers create opportunities for students to experience dignity, self-actualization, and politicized academic content around systems of oppression. These studies, however, rarely address the concurrent humanizing of the teachers doing this work. This analysis offers a case of a teacher becoming who he is *through* his relational work with students, suggesting that humanizing is as much about teachers' complex and fluid subjectivities as it is about the enactment of particular pedagogies.

"Oh, so we can joke about things we don't like?": Political pedagogies of humor in LGBTQ+ reaction videos

Addie Shrodes, Northwestern University

In this presentation, I explore political pedagogies of humor in LGBTQ+ reaction videos and ways transgender and gender-expansive teens narrate the possibilities these pedagogies open up. In the videos, LGBTQ+ video creators watch and react to discriminatory media forms and technologies, often in comedic ways. In exploring teen engagement with reaction videos, I seek to understand affective dimensions of humanizing pedagogy with a focus on political pedagogies of humor that mediate consequential learning. I characterize consequential learning as learning that matters to members of marginalized communities as they dismantle systems of oppression toward justice and liberation (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Jurow & Shea, 2015; Zavala, 2016).

I draw on sociocultural learning theory (Cole, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) and queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (1999) to think about consequential learning in purpose-driven activities mediated by social relationships and cultural artifacts within queer and trans communities. Muñoz (1999) argues that the queer political strategies and practices of survival and worldmaking “are not figured out alone” but are rather “informed by the example of others” and “forged by the pressures of everyday life” (p. 38).

I draw on data from a qualitative study of transgender and gender-expansive teens’ digital worldmaking that employs case study methods, ethnographic perspectives, and humanistic approaches (Kincheloe, 2001). I weave together data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with transgender and gender-expansive teens and video artifacts by a popular LGBTQ+ YouTuber named in the interviews to explore two questions: How does a LGBTQ+ reaction video maker teach humorous ways to disrupt dominant ideologies and the discrimination they structure? What are the ways in which transgender and gender-expansive teens narrate their experience with humor in these reaction videos and the possibilities that humor opens up? Here, I define dominant ideologies as the systems of belief and representation that reflect the interests of those in positions of power and structure power, privilege, and oppression (Gee, 2015; Hall, 1996).

The ways youth narrate their experiences with humor illustrate how political pedagogies of humor can humanize youth who are marginalized in school by building felt relations around shared experiences of oppression and learning to ‘laugh off’ dominant ideologies that dehumanize their experience as transgender and gender-expansive youth who identify with LGBTQ+ communities, most in terms of both gender and sexuality.

“More happy endings and fluff”: Desired futures in an LGBTQ+ youth group

Suraj Uttamchandani, Indiana University

This discussion draws on a multi-year ethnographic and discursive research project alongside Chroma (pseudonym), an LGBTQ+ youth group. Chroma has a subgroup, the Chroma Teaching Committee (CTC), that consists of youth who create and present trainings about LGBTQ+ lives, most often to teachers or other youth-serving professionals. Elsewhere we have pointed to the resistance youth face in these trainings (Dennis et al., 2019) and the role of relationship-building in their advocacy work (Uttamchandani, under review). Here, I question, “how do CTC youth discuss and describe the future they desire in these trainings and presentations?”

This question sits at the intersection of several conversations in humanizing pedagogies. It resonates with conceptions of learning as a process of future-organizing (e.g., Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2017) by showing what kinds of futures they render. It takes up Tuck’s (2009) notion of desire-oriented, rather than damage-centered, research, which “is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered” (p. 416). Finally, it offers opportunity to play with how time organizes humanizing pedagogy projects (Malkki, 2001).

I explore this question by looking across the slide decks CTC youth created and used in their presentations from November 2015 to May 2019 (31 total). I queried the slide decks for terms that might convey complex visions of youth’s well-being by using search terms like “future,” “hope,” and “want.” I then engaged in microanalysis through critical discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell, 1998) to understand how that discourse was functioning to make (in)visible particular visions of the future. For example, in a slide given at an LGBTQ+ film festival, youth listed things that they hoped for in the future of LGBTQ+ cinema, which ranged from the very practical (“Trans actors playing trans characters”) to the relatively political (“More happy endings and fluff”). Elsewhere in the slides, youth also point to desire as a potential site for teacher advocacy (“Support staff and students who want to start a Gender-Sexuality Alliance or other LGBTQ+ student group”) but also as sites where teacher oppression and student resistance may be necessary (for example, youth note, “Remember people don’t have to give you info if they don’t want to”). Across the slides, then, possible futures are constantly (re)shaped as potential sites of hegemony, resistance, justice, and joy. This exploration offers an example of how humanizing pedagogies, with their attention to time and complex desire, can intersect with newer learning sciences approaches that treat learning as reorganizing possible futures.

“We’re not doing ‘inclusion’”: Learning into a haunted beloved community

Irene H. Yoon, University of Utah

In the special education world, “inclusion” is a matter of compliance with providing students with time in “general education” settings (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). When the principal at Memorial Elementary, where I recently spent a year in ethnographic data collection, stated, “We’re not doing ‘inclusion’” and “if you have to earn inclusion that is by definition not inclusion,” I began to pay attention to how people at the school used the language of special education “inclusion” alongside the languages of “beloved community” and racial justice (King, Jr., 1956). Beloved community was forming (and was disrupted) at multiple levels at Memorial: student-peer friendships, intentionally designed curriculum and pedagogy, and school structures.

This presentation explores becoming a beloved community from an affective framework of sociological hauntings (Gordon, 2008; Yoon, 2019) connected with Holland & Lave’s (2001) history in person. Because of ongoing projects of state-sanctioned violence, silencing, and institutional erasure, ghosts from the past populate the present. Hauntings also are potential catalysts for imagining and becoming intersectionally just, beloved communities. At Memorial Elementary, hauntings were part of the school’s everyday practices and dreams—memory, present, and future (Gordon, 2011; Malkki, 2001). That is, learning into a haunted beloved community was mediated through history, power, and freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002).

In this presentation I examine classroom-level curriculum and interaction, including equitable access to making valued contributions and transforming curriculum (Gutiérrez, 2012). I trace elements of humanizing pedagogies that seek to “agitate, arouse, and inspire” in Memorial’s imagining-becoming (Camangian, 2015). However, I strain against the capacity of “humanizing pedagogies” to hold concurrent, contradictory forces that are hauntings, including: identifying with disability; healing from trauma while experiencing it; or living in multiple time-scapes and institutional structures at the same time. I suggest that remembering, becoming, and imagining are concurrent affective learning processes that transform friendships, curriculum, and pedagogy toward a “beloved community” (hooks, 1994; Love, 2019) wherein “inclusion” is lively and sparkling, even while it is contested, never settled (Brosi & hooks, 2012; Patel, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2018a).

Discussant

Susan Jurow, University of Colorado Boulder

Susan Jurow is a senior scholar whose research and partnerships in the learning sciences have focused on equity, collaborative design of educational projects, and centering the creativity and consequentiality of marginalized groups. In her discussion, Jurow will reflect on the constant re-creations and improvisations—the layers of history, politics, relationships, and life—of humanizing pedagogies as reflected in the symposium presentations and in her own work.

Synthesis and conclusion

The symposium connects theories and disciplinary worlds to urge the learning sciences to consider the power, contradictions, and impossibilities of defining humanizing pedagogies. It also discusses some cautions about humanizing pedagogies as a concept that is growing in popularity and potential misuse or dilution of meaning, particularly in its attention to power and disruption or abolition. In content, format, and the persons in the room, this symposium is an opportunity to “build what we can imagine” as one piece in the future—one that is intergenerationally bridging past, present, and future—of the learning sciences.

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