Designing for Compassion in Schools: A Humanizing Approach to Co-Design

Ashley Seidel Potvin, Leah Peña Teeters, William R. Penuel
Ashley.Potvin@colorado.edu, Leah.Teeters@colorado.edu; William.Penuel@colorado.edu
University of Colorado Boulder

Abstract: Collaborative design as a participatory approach to organizing research and learning environments engages educators as partners in ways that draw on their lived experiences and identities (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). This paper focuses on the co-design of a course for educators in compassion and dignity and explores co-design as a humanizing experience for educators, one that invites educators’ whole selves into the process. We ask: a) In what ways is the co-design of a compassion course a humanizing experience? b) How does a humanizing co-design process support the enactment of compassion across scales of practice? The intentionality given to the co-design experience supported participants to see connections among meetings, professional contexts, and personal lives in new and expansive ways. As participants enacted learning across scales of practice, they were presented with new understandings of the content, and in turn designed a product that embodied expansive and compassionate learning.

Keywords: co-design, humanizing, compassion, expansive learning, educators

Introduction

Collaborative design, often referred to as co-design, as a participatory approach to organizing research and learning environments, engages educators as partners in ways that draw on their expertise, lived experiences, and identities (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). Co-design processes can be both challenging and rewarding for educators as they explore new and unfamiliar roles and content (Frumin, 2019; Penuel, Roschelle, & Shechtman, 2007; Potvin, 2020). In this paper, we address Ehret and Hollett’s (2016) call for attending to the “lived dimensions of learning and being that are just as essential to lasting, transformative change” (p. 251) within participatory design, which they argue have been overlooked. Specifically, we explore what we refer to here as the humanizing aspects of co-design, that is, the ways that the co-design experience is characterized by compassion and individual and collective agency for reimagining new possibilities for schools. A humanizing co-design environment is one that recognizes the complexity and multidimensionality of all participants, and where dignity and care are centered (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Paris, 2011).

The co-design project presented in this article was focused on the design of a digital compassion course for educators that addresses the essential dignity of educators and students, supports the wellness of educators through compassion practices and tools, and contributes to educators’ capacities to imagine and create more just and compassionate schools. We define compassion as the recognition of another person’s suffering coupled with a response to relieve that suffering (Ashar et al., 2016). Compassion can be practiced, cultivated, and sustained through specific training and community contexts that provide individuals with tools and resources to reduce the distress they feel when faced with another’s suffering and increase their ability to respond (Jazaieri et al., 2014; Weng et al., 2018). Key elements include extending compassion to people perceived as difficult, investigating obstacles to extending care to them, and recognizing that everyone is deserving of compassion (Jinpa, 2015). Cultivating compassion has the potential to support educators and researchers to work toward equity and justice, and counter deficit views of students and families that often permeate schools (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Conklin, 2008).

We analyze a co-design project focused on a novel context where educators and researchers had varied familiarity with the core content (compassion practice), specifically, where expertise was distributed across the research-practice boundary and variable across the whole team, and where there was significant uncertainty about how to link individual practices of compassion to the shared design goal of supporting collective action toward more equitable, just, and compassionate schools. We argue, through analysis of educators’ perceptions and experiences, that the co-design process was a humanizing experience for educators involved. We examine the ways that the humanizing co-design process invited expansive learning across multiple scales of practice and in turn, how this impacted the designed product.
Theoretical framework

Co-design for expansive, humanizing learning depends on creating conditions for people to learn together, and to envision ways not just to develop personal insights but also to support collective action toward more just and compassionate schools. Expansive learning theory posits that learning occurs as “learners are involved in constructing and implementing a radically new, wider and more complex object and concept for their activity” (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 2). It is an apt theory for analyzing co-design for compassion, as participants engaged in the design of a radically new compassion course for educators.

A key feature of expansive learning is that the content or skill is not predetermined. That is, the design or solution to a dilemma is not specified in advance, rather, the collective works together to develop novel designs and approaches. Learning occurs as people collaboratively develop solutions, such that co-designers learn together from creating, as they bring expertise to the experience that gets transformed in the process of designing something new. Through a facilitated process of co-design, new activity is created when participants negotiate and solve problems together and new possibilities emerge. It is through the process of forging new forms of activity and designs together that opportunities for transformative agency are ripe. Through the expansive learning process, these new forms of activity and design “carry future-oriented visions loaded with initiative and commitment by the learners” (Sannino et al., 2016, p. 603).

Transformative agency is not just an important indicator of the expansive learning process, it is also central to our conceptualization of humanizing design environments. Our notion of humanizing co-design is rooted in frameworks for compassionate organizations (Dutton et al., 2006) and expansive learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010), which emphasizes that co-design experiences should recognize that members are more than their professional identities, encourage members to display their full humanity, care for one another, and support individual and collective agency in imagining radically different possibilities for their organizations. We draw upon these key features of compassionate organizations in our analysis.

In our analysis, we investigate the ways that humanizing approaches to co-design support expansive learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010) across scales of practice. Expansive learning engages the entire activity system in which participants are situated, producing new forms of activity and possibilities for meaningful participation. From an activity theory perspective, where the collective ecology of activity is considered, the aim of co-design for compassion involves shifts in not only individual practices, but also a reorganization of ways of participating across scales of practice (Jurow & Shea, 2015). Generating learning that can be applied across physical, social, and temporal scales requires approaches to design that move from the individual level of change to systems level of change. We analyze the ways that co-design facilitation and participation supported a systemic approach to learning and design.

Methods

Our primary research questions are: a) In what ways is the co-design of a compassion course a humanizing experience? b) How does a humanizing co-design process support the enactment of compassion across scales of practice?

Co-design context

The co-design project was focused on the design of a digital course on teacher leadership in compassion and dignity. The goal of the course was to provide educators with resources for caring for themselves and cultivating and sustaining compassion for students, students’ families, colleagues, and their school communities. Co-designers consisted of ten educators from a partner school district and five university-based researchers. Educators included teachers, counselors, and one principal from six elementary and middle schools. The team met weekly in-person for two hours between October 2019 through May 2020, for a total of 58 hours. We catalyzed our collaboration with a “bootstrapping event” (Penuel et al., 2007); the team of educators and researchers completed an 8-week compassion training together focused on the growing science of compassion and secular practices for cultivating compassion grounded in the Buddhist tradition. This experience served to establish a shared foundation and framework for compassion that informed the co-design process and the designed course. The team then met weekly in person until March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in statewide stay-at-home orders, and meetings moved to a virtual platform until May 2020. Meetings focused on applying compassion practices to support wellness, analyzing sources of suffering in schools, and designing content for a compassion course.

Data sources

We collected and analyzed data from 13 co-design meetings, including audio transcripts, fieldnotes, and artifacts created or modified during meetings (e.g., curriculum planning documents). In addition, we collected written
educator reflections and we interviewed educators at the conclusion of the study using a semi-structured interview protocol.

Data analysis
Using qualitative methods, we developed a codebook by identifying deductive codes from our conceptual framework. We used Engeström and colleagues’ (2014) approach to analyzing transformative agency in deductive coding to look for the ways in which educators demonstrated agency throughout the co-design process, coding for resisting, criticizing, explicating, envisioning, committing to action, and taking consequential actions. We also drew upon the compassion organizing framework (Dutton et al., 2006) in our deductive coding to surface when a school routine or policy was mentioned, a participant recounted a story of care, or named an emotion they experienced, and to explore how it is participants navigated moving from individual practice to collective action to transform their schools. The first two authors then coded two meeting transcripts together using the deductive codes and developing additional codes inductively, revising the codebook (Miles et al., 2014). The first two authors coded several transcripts individually until inter-rater reliability was established at 90% and then continued until all data were coded. They wrote analytic memos, summarizing emergent themes. The first author then engaged in second-cycle coding to consolidate codes and identify salient themes. They continued writing memos to summarize the themes and shared them with the other authors for review. Key themes were discussed among the author team and checked against the data corpus.

Findings
Within the co-design work, participants shared meals, discussed vulnerable experiences, engaged authentically with a wide range of emotions, and shared stories of their families. Participants were invited to bring their full selves to the collaborative process and to the curriculum design. Through bringing their full selves to the process, the team co-constructed a humanizing design environment that opened possibilities for agency, compassion, and imagination. This fostered a reciprocal form of engagement, whereby participants demonstrated agency, contributed to the co-design process, and engaged in new learning that they brought into other contexts (e.g., classrooms, schools, parenting). As co-design supported movement across scales of practice, the designed course thus embodied that same spirit to move beyond overly individualistic paradigms of compassion towards a more collective paradigm.

Co-design as humanizing

The co-design experience bridged personal and professional aspects of educators’ lives.

The team completed an 8-week compassion training and subsequently engaged in compassion practices together during co-design meetings. Educators shared that such practices had become integral to both their personal and professional lives. The compassion co-design supported them in developing a home compassion practice, in which they engaged in informal (e.g., bringing awareness to a daily routine) and formal (e.g., contemplative meditation) practices. As Jessica explained, “What we’re talking about here [compassion practice] in terms of being a tool for teaching, this kind of bridges that gap of the personal development that becomes professional development” (Jessica Interview). In Jessica’s view, the co-design experience and the compassion course designed offered skills beneficial to both her personal and professional life. The invitation to examine one’s personal and professional life and to apply compassion practice in both contexts was a unique experience for Jessica. Educators used the compassion practices to deepen their relationships with friends and family members, such as their children, and they used these practices to improve their interactions with colleagues, students, and students’ families who they viewed as challenging. In reflecting on her experience of the compassion training, Ruth highlighted the ways that the co-design experience bridged both personal and professional elements of her life. She shared that the training really affected me in a great way. Because I was starting from a baseline of not having a practice. So, the only place I could go is up. And the whole idea of understanding and really thinking about how we all have our moments of suffering and we’re all really doing our best. It’s not that that wasn’t anything that I was aware of but just brought it to a new level of awareness and understanding for me. So that was really important. And I noticed that I was really in a more grounded place all Fall. Just really did affect me which carried over to my parenting, which carried over to my interactions with colleagues and my work with students, my understanding.

(Ruth Interview)
For Ruth, engaging in compassion practices and establishing a routine of these practices marked new learning for her. She underscored the importance of learning about compassion and compassion practices, which impacted her parenting and relationships with colleagues and students and supported her to feel more grounded personally and professionally.

Several educators highlighted that they developed tools for self-compassion through the co-design process; self-compassion moved across social scales as educators applied these tools to their personal and professional lives. Self-compassion was an important design and discussion topic as the team worked to develop a compassion curriculum in the midst of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The group often engaged in self-compassion practices and discussed both challenges to and tools for self-compassion. Bridgette, for example, spoke about how challenging self-compassion was for her, sharing that it was kind of the source of all my stress and, you know, teachers staying up at night just worrying about kids. It’s all because we feel such a strong responsibility for, you know, all of these students. And we feel emotionally connected to them and it just can be like a really strong emotional toll and leads to that kind of burnout thing. And I think self-compassion is the first step and really dealing with that, and the more we kind of talked about that I saw how important that is for educators. And it’s been really meaningful to me and helped me be better and more compassionate to my students when I am able to give myself a break and just not be in this obsessive thinking and worrying about how I’m perceived, or things like that. It’s really a transformational thing, I think. (Bridgette Interview)

Bridgette, like other educators in the group, gave insight into how self-compassion was essential for her personal and professional wellness, sharing that when she learned to be more compassionate towards herself, she was able to demonstrate more compassion towards her students. For Bridgette, this was a profound and even “transformational” experience, and one that was deeply embedded within the humanizing co-design process.

Designing the compassion course was authentic and meaningful

Educators in this study experienced co-design as a process that supported their personal and professional development and wellness and reciprocally recognized that their personal and professional experiences were essential for developing the compassion curriculum. During meetings, educators shared both personal and professional challenges which helped shape the design of the compassion course. Mia, who shared on several occasions that she had been experiencing a challenging year, recognized that many other educators may feel similarly and thus her struggles were important to bring to the design: “my stress as an educator was so heightened that I could engage in the thinking of designing a course … I’m in it. I can really speak to burnout. I can really speak to stress from this very real currently lived experience” (Mia Interview). Educators not only recognized the importance of their lived experiences to the design, but also viewed one another’s contributions as essential. Michael explained that team members “each had potent contributions to the whole and this in turn makes me have a ton of confidence that the end result will be accessible to all who choose to take the course” (EOY Reflection).

A couple of educators did not immediately recognize the expertise they brought to the process, but as they continued to show up, they gained more confidence in themselves and in the process. At the end of the year Ruth reflected that she was most proud that she “work[ed] through my anxiety that I wasn’t going to be able to bring anything to the group or offer anything to the group because I was starting at a place where I wasn’t sure about any of it … What can I offer? … But finding that the collective work and the collective energy and the collective conversations, everybody was able to add to it” (Ruth Interview). Both educators who expressed uncertainty about the process continued to attend meetings consistently and made significant contributions to the course design, suggesting that they, as Ruth stated, found support in the “collective work” and “energy.”

For many educators, developing a compassion course with and for other educators was authentic and meaningful. At times, educators referenced the future students of the course and facilitators often encouraged the group to consider these future students in the design. Educators viewed the co-designed compassion course as a shared mission, one that “is going to try to bring more good into the world” (Bridgette Interview).

Co-design fostered connection and a sense of rejuvenation

Educators described the co-design process as one that fostered connection and rejuvenated them, suggesting that the environment was a humanizing one for educators. Educators found that connections forged through the co-design process served as an antidote to feelings of isolation. Feelings of isolation are prevalent in teaching (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005), and such feelings were exacerbated by the context of the global pandemic. Bridgette shared that
One big takeaway from the codesign process was a strong sense of community. I can feel isolated sometimes in my job and it was amazing to work with so many people who have the common goal of bringing more compassion into the world. Especially in this time where there are so many things to be depressed about, this really restored my faith in humanity and helped me realize what is important in life and in my job. It helped to hear that others struggle with very similar situations in the educational world. I saw immediate impacts in my day-to-day life and my work. It has helped me bring a sense of compassion to every interaction with parents, students, and even my own family. (EOY Reflection)

Bridgette found comfort and connection within the co-design “community,” and these connections offered her a different perspective on “humanity,” her “life,” and her “job,” one that was hopeful and agentic. This in turn bolstered her to bring compassion to her school community.

Bridgette was not the only educator who felt buoyed by the co-design process. Nora described the meetings “like a support group every week for me” (EOY Reflection). Jessica explained that it “really reconnected me with kind of the ideals of teaching. I think the farther you get into your educational career, it can be so easy to be overwhelmed and kind of crushed by the minutiae of teaching that this was a nice re-centering for me in that personal and professional overlap” (Jessica Interview). Likewise, Mia explained,

The co-design process has offered an opportunity to commit, to show up again and again, to work through resistance, to cultivate conscious and intentional community, and to finally rest in the nourishing comfort of a compassionate space with myself and with others. This process has been life-changing in that it has brought consistent mindful practice into a space that is usually so full and stressful. This process has transformed me, bringing self-compassion into a place that is often full of self-criticism. All of this allows me to step into my role as educator with more awareness and the ability to have compassion for others. (EOY Reflection)

For these educators, working together towards a shared goal of designing a compassion course for other educators with a vision of creating more compassionate schools, rejuvenated them, increased their hope, and prevented feelings of overwhelm and burnout.

Learning across scales of practice
A humanizing approach to co-design supported educators in applying and integrating learning across multiple scales of practice, including social, geographic, and temporal scales. While not a requirement of the co-design process, many educators practiced compassion outside of the meeting times, connected practices to their personal lives, and brought compassion into their schools, thus learning moved across scales of practice. It was this movement that helped the team begin to bridge between individual practices and changing schools in the design of the compassion course.

Educators reported engaging deeply in the inner work that supports compassion in action. For instance, educators spoke about being metacognitive about their emotions, changing the ways they reacted to situations, recognizing the suffering of those around them, and increasing self-compassion. Educators also identified particular practices that supported them to be more compassionate, such as bringing awareness to daily routines and interactions, setting intentions, and focusing on breathing during challenging situations. In several cases, educators already established a mindfulness or compassion practice prior to joining the team and these educators pointed to the co-design process as strengthening their practice.

Educators did not just keep compassion practices to themselves, but they also brought compassion into their own schools and relationships. Examples include teaching intention-setting and breathing practices to students, talking to colleagues and administrators about compassion, and using compassion tools to shift interactions with students, students’ families, and/or colleagues who they considered challenging. Similarly, several educators reported bringing ideas from the co-design process into their schools — such as when one principal shared research articles with his staff that the co-design team had read together or when an educator began writing field notes, a practice that a subset of the co-design team engaged in, to reflect on her interactions at school. And, as we reported previously, educators applied compassion practices in their personal lives, using these tools to improve their interactions and relationships with family members and friends.

A key challenge for the design of the compassion course was to connect individual insight to collective action leading to change in schools. Facilitators situated design work within participants’ school-based contexts
and introduced readings/frameworks that sought to historicize and socialize suffering (e.g., Dutton et al., 2006; Garza, 2009; Ginwright, 2018). While shifting from individual insight to collective action in design was challenging, some members “got really excited” about the pivot to collective action and challenged others to accept responsibility for social and educational inequities by designing for more radically inclusive schools. Educators also began taking up compassion to shift structures and routines by engaging in actions such as starting staff meetings with a compassion practice, coaching colleagues who felt overwhelmed from the rapid transition to online teaching at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and examining and revising grading practices. Further, educators discussed routines or policies in their schools and district that would benefit from change through a collective and compassionate approach, such as discipline, teacher evaluation, standardized testing, supports for students experiencing trauma, professional development, and classroom-level routines. Educators also identified existing practices in their schools as compassionate such as supporting student-led initiatives (e.g., student-organized school walkout for climate change), adjusting classroom discipline policies to work with students to develop a positive culture rather than removing students from the classroom, organizing a donation drive among faculty for personal and home items students in the school community needed (e.g., snow boots, kitchen items), and checking in with students more frequently through email and phone calls during remote learning due to statewide stay-at-home orders.

Cultivating a co-design environment that invited participants to bring their full selves was instrumental in supporting practices of compassion to be infused across multiple scales of practice. The approach centered the experiences of participants, supporting them to connect the learning to their personal and professional lives. As participants enacted new learning in diverse social settings, in varied physical spaces, and over time, the lens by which they understood compassion became oriented towards collective change of systems.

**Designed course embodied co-design principles**

The humanizing co-design process invited learning across scales, impacting the design of the compassion course. As educators engaged in expansive learning across multiple scales of practice, it made available novel forms of participation that expanded the possibilities for what could be designed. Educators brought their personal and professional lives to the co-design experience and demonstrated agency by taking new compassion ideas and practices back into their personal and professional spheres. These new experiences helped to inform the design of the compassion course as one that bridged individual practice and collective action. Ruth highlighted that the course was designed to support educators in establishing a personal compassion practice as well as to engage in compassionate action that moved across social and geographic scales. She explained, “this is a class that introduces and deepens one’s understanding of compassion and the way that compassion is helpful on an individual, collective and global manner” (Ruth Interview).

Mia described the compassion course as unique, one that will impact educators’ personal and professional lives: “It’s just a personal shift in the way you live and see life that impacts everything. But definitely how you show up in the classroom, how you view your colleagues and parents and students. The entire learning community. It’s an inside-out job…And that’s what I think makes it really unique.” She continued to describe the impacts of the designed course, “It’s like this ripple out effect. You start with yourself and your understanding of all this and your lived experience and then it ripples out to impact the community, and hopefully if you’re able to really bring in that leadership piece, impact your school staff and leadership. So that actually ripples out even further” (Mia Interview). Educators, like Mia, recognized the significance of designing a course to support other educators in learning across scales in a “ripple out effect;” one goal of the designed course was to support future educators taking the course to bring compassion and leadership to their school communities.

Some educators understood the compassion course to address professional challenges they experienced, such as a “stressful, results-driven culture in education” (Bridgette EOY Reflection) or “how we treat each other and treat ourselves” (Nora EOY Reflection). Jessica, for example, described the compassion course as addressing a sense of isolation and fostering a sense of connection.

Teaching can be so isolating that I think this is a great tool for teachers in those moments of isolation. In those moments of losing your temper with a class, and those moments of staying awake at night suffering over “What do I do with this kid?” This is an excellent tool for teachers to have when they are just with themselves. So much of teacher professional development is “What can I do? How can I change this?” And this is just about “How am I, how do I be?” I’ve never had that addressed in education. And yet those ideas of staying awake at night of really emotionally investing are core. (Jessica Interview)
Jessica believed that the co-designed compassion course will help act as a bridge between educators’ personal and professional lives, as it focuses on educators’ wellness and addresses educators’ relationships. Attending to the principles of compassion in the co-design process and not just the product changed how participants experienced co-design and in turn, generated a designed product that embodied the design principles more fully.

**Implications**

We sought to understand the ways that educators and researchers engaged in the co-design of a course to support educators to create more compassionate schools, and how they created a co-design space that centered humanizing interactions. Members brought their personal and professional joys and challenges to the co-design process. This authentic engagement encouraged educators to participate as their whole selves and supported connection and rejuvenation, informing the design of the compassion course and supporting co-design team members to carry practices of compassion across scales of practice. Educators felt confident to enact compassionate changes within their schools and personal lives and designed a curriculum that could support future educators to do the same. This study underscores the importance of attending to the process of co-design and experience of participants and suggests that doing so supports expanding participants’ learning and experiences and generates designs for learning that are more powerful and sustaining. This study points to key structures that allowed for and encouraged a humanizing co-design environment to develop and offers practical suggestions for facilitators of collaborative design teams.

**Reposition expertise through shared learning**

A fundamental aspect of co-design holds that members of the design team bring their own knowledge, expertise, and experience to bear on the design (Penuel et al., 2007; Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). With the intention of repositioning researchers and educators so as to genuinely elevate the unique expertise of all team members, we engaged in shared learning. We participated in an 8-week course, where all participants were positioned as learners. The intentionality of designing experiences, such as participation in this course, where participants could learn together, share their knowledge, and expand their understandings was critical in the generation of humanizing co-design. We suggest that before embarking on a collaborative project, facilitators take stock of who holds expertise and power and plan for shared learning experiences to reposition participants.

**Cultivate a community of care, compassion, and trust**

The goal of the course promoted reflexivity and explicitly attended to prefiguring caring relationships within the co-design process that reflected how we hoped educators would engage in their schools. We integrated compassion practices into our weekly co-design sessions. Engaging in the compassion training and practicing compassion together supported the group in cultivating a community characterized by care, compassion, and trust and in developing shared language, goals, and experiences to build upon during co-design work. This foundation supported the enactment of compassion in the co-design space.

**Center shared experiences of joy and suffering**

Attention to context was essential for humanizing the co-design process, and this included explicitly acknowledging and making space for current global, personal, and professional events that impacted people’s lives and caused both joy and suffering. The COVID-19 pandemic erupted in the midst of the co-design process, and it became a shared experience of suffering, one in which opportunities for compassion among our team arose. As meetings shifted to virtual and occurred in the context of participants’ homes, pets and children became a regular part of meetings, in a way that invited joy and connection. There will always be events impacting co-designers’ lives and providing opportunities for these realities to emerge within the process allows for fluidity of design, resulting in a product that continues to be responsive to the context and honor teachers’ humanity.

**Conclusion**

We examined the ways that the humanizing co-design process generated expansive learning across multiple scales of practice. The intentionality given to the experience of co-design supported participants in engaging in the meetings, their professional contexts, and personal lives in new and expansive ways. As participants enacted their learning across scales of practice, they were presented with new understandings of the focal content, and in turn developed a designed product that embodied expansive and compassionate learning. Our analysis underscores that researchers and facilitators must attend to the process, not just the product, of co-design. To support the design of humanizing experiences, researchers and facilitators can (1) reposition expertise through shared learning, (2) cultivate a community of care, compassion, and trust, and (3) center shared experiences of joy and suffering.
References