Student Emotions and Engagement: Enacting Humanizing Pedagogy in Higher Education

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Abstract

Student engagement in higher education has been a topic of discussion for decades, as student engagement directly indexes student retention, achievement, and career development. While previous research emphasizes the importance of effective teaching practices to increase student engagement in higher education, faculty and staff report institutional and professional challenges to increase interactions with students. This study highlights cases of successful teacher-student relationships that engendered positive student emotions and advanced student engagement in higher education settings. Using the thank-you note messages provided by students in a Thank-a-Teacher initiative, data were analyzed qualitatively through the theoretical principles of humanizing pedagogy (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). The findings indicate that the enactment of humanizing pedagogy through conveying emotions and forming positive teacher-student relationships made a meaningful impact on student motivation, engagement, and growth. Implications for the transformation and liberation of higher education through affect-driven pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords: gratitude, higher education, humanizing pedagogy, student engagement, teacher-student relationship

Over three decades, student engagement in higher education institutions has been frequently pointed out as one of the main factors in predicting student success and retention rate (Cassidy & Eachus, 2000; Grier-Reed et al., 2012; Maguire et al., 2017). Reports show that between 20 and 30% of first-year students fail to progress to their second year, and only about 64% graduate with degrees within six years (NCES, 2022; Tinto, 2010). Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency remote learning students were forced into, concerns about student engagement have intensified. The quality of student and instructor interaction in higher education classrooms is closely related to student engagement, which is worthy of further investigation.

A high-quality teacher-student relationship (TSR) and effective teaching practices are indicators of elevated student involvement and engagement in higher education. Positive emotions play a crucial role in these interactions between faculty and students and extend to student success. Depending on how the student felt in these interactions, students' satisfaction and views of the class, the institution, or the learning experience could change (White, 2013). Thus, in student engagement theories, the emotional aspect is highlighted as a component that influences students' overall engagement and achievement (Bryson, 2014; Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In particular, increasing student diversity in U.S. higher education institutions calls for high-quality TSR and engagement to provide equitable academic opportunities for all students. In today's diverse higher education contexts, paying attention to and promoting positive student emotions could index students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which in turn, contributes to building a more inclusive campus environment (Lubit & Lubit, 2019).

In this study, we examine TSR in student comment data retrieved from a Thank-a-Teacher initiative to gain insights into the pedagogical approaches that fostered positive student emotions in higher education classrooms. Specifically, we focus on addressing the following questions: (a) How do students perceive higher education teachers' approach to teaching and TSR? and (b) How does TSR positively influence student emotions and engagement?

Literature Review

Background

Previous research stated that positive emotions and TSR have notable benefits for students. Positive emotions lead to student satisfaction, learning performance, creativity, social integration, resilience, and coping mechanisms (Maguire et al., 2017; White, 2013; Xerri et al., 2018). Students who reported positive relationships with peers and instructional staff showed higher levels of emotional and cognitive engagement, thus, developing a sense of belonging (Maguire et al., 2017; Pedler et al., 2022). Unarguably, TSR is proven to promote positive emotions leading to emotional and cognitive engagements.

Over a decade of research demonstrated the importance of TSR both inside and outside of the classroom and shed light on practices that bring about positive effects. In terms of interactions

inside the classroom, student-centered pedagogies, such as active learning strategies, promoted instructor-student contact and enhanced students' sense of belonging (Fisher & Machirori, 2021; Thomas, 2012). Other classroom practices, such as learning and using students' names, providing timely and constructive feedback, and disclosing instructors' own experiences, contributed to authentic TSR, leading to students' academic success (Cuseo, 2018; Ingraham et al., 2018; Kim & Sax, 2014).

Interactions outside of the classroom, such as informal mentoring, making personal connections, providing emotional support, showing mutual respect, keeping the line of communication open, and advising students, showed positive effects on student's academic success, retention, and sense of belonging (Cole & Griffin, 2013; Estepp et al., 2017; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Furthermore, positive instructor-student interactions made an impact on particular student populations, such as commuters, first-generation, low-income, and at-risk students, by enriching academic development, success, and integration into college (Dwyer, 2017; Fuentes et al., 2014; Guzzardo et al., 2021).

Research suggests a myriad of benefits of promoting positive student emotions and instructor-student interactions in higher education classrooms. Positive emotions of gratitude were evident in high-quality TSR, where instructors cultivated an ethos of care and respect for students (Grantham et al., 2015; Hagenauer et al., 2023). However, the factors that contributed to positive emotions and interactions remain under-investigated, especially concerning the factors that could benefit students amid the COVID-19 pandemic that forced students into a large-scale remote learning environment (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). In this study, we utilize a critical lens, humanizing pedagogy, to examine the positive effects of TSR and interactions at a four-year research-intensive higher education institution.

Humanizing Pedagogy

Grounded in Freirean philosophy, *humanism* in humanizing pedagogy focuses on the cognitive capacity of humans to develop full humanity through personal and collective self-actualization (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). Paulo Freire's humanist approach evolved into influential philosophies and conceptualization of educational approaches, including liberalism, Marxism, phenomenology, progressive education, feminism, and critical race theory (Schugurensky, 2011). As Freire (1970) emphasized, teaching is eminently political and should be treated as a means to emancipation, preparing students for self-managed life. Thus, learning is no longer viewed as a transmission or receiving of knowledge, but rather a practice of empowerment.

Previous research highlighted the importance and influence of humanizing pedagogy in higher education settings. Specifically, studies emphasized humanizing pedagogy leading to stronger TSR established in online settings, higher student engagement, equitable access to higher education, and students developing critical thinking skills (Gleason, 2021; Mino, 2020; Olszewska et al., 2023; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2021). In the context of U.S. higher education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, such humanistic philosophies and humanizing pedagogical approaches carry more weight as the heart of humanizing pedagogy lies in the

involvement of students in learning, paying attention to emotions, and respecting personal histories.

In a proposed framework for TSR, Cox (2011) highlighted the importance of interactions that humanize teachers and students. Humanizing pedagogy emerged as an apt lens to uncover teachers' approaches and practices that humanized the learning experience for students. Inspired by Freire's conceptualization of humanizing pedagogy, del Carmen Salazar (2013) put forth efforts to reinvent the principles and practices of humanizing pedagogy by outlining five theoretical principles and ten pedagogical principles in practice.

Through a review and synthesis of scholarship across the globe, del Carmen Salazar (2013, p. 128) proposed the following five tenets as the guiding principles to apply Freire's pedagogical philosophies in the context of today's education:

1. The full development of the person is essential for humanization.
2. To deny someone else's humanization is also to deny one's own.
3. The journey for humanization is an individual and collective endeavor toward critical consciousness.
4. Critical reflection and action can transform structures that impede our own and others' humanness, thus facilitating liberation for all.
5. Educators are responsible for promoting a more fully human world through their pedagogical principles and practices.

Acknowledging the challenge and complexity of applying such a philosophical approach, ten principles in the practice of humanizing pedagogy were introduced through a synthesis of research and application from the past four decades.
In the description of the fifth tenet, del Carmen Salazar (2013, p. 138) unpacked the pedagogical practices in pursuit of promoting a humanizing pedagogy. The ten principles and practices of humanizing pedagogy are as follows:

1. The reality of the learner is crucial.
2. Critical consciousness is imperative for students and educators.
3. Students' socio-cultural resources are valued and extended.
4. Content is meaningful and relevant to students' lives.
5. Students' prior knowledge is linked to new learning.
6. Trusting and caring relationships advance the pursuit of humanization.
7. Mainstream knowledge and discourse styles matter.
8. Students will achieve through their academic, intellectual, and social abilities.
9. Student empowerment requires the use of learning strategies.
10. Challenging inequity in the educational system can promote transformation.

The foundational idea grounded in humanizing pedagogy is respecting the realities of students' and teachers' lives (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Aligned with the motivation and values that inspired the Thank-a-Teacher initiative, which provided the data sources we analyze in this

study, a holistic understanding and interpretation of students' and teachers' lives are crucial to transforming the learning spaces in higher education. Thus, the principles and practices of humanizing pedagogy were an ideal theoretical framework for this study to holistically interpret the nature of the interactions between students and higher education teachers.

Research Methodology

Data Collection

The study was conducted by a faculty professional development center at a four-year research-intensive state university in the United States. The data sources were collected from a Thank-a-Teacher program, a university-wide initiative launched by the center in the spring of 2021. The data for this study were collected during the spring semester of 2022, the second year of the program's existence.

The purpose of the Thank-a-Teacher initiative is to offer students an avenue to express their gratitude and write a thank-you note to any educator or staff member who made a difference in their learning experience. This initiative is intended to acknowledge faculty and staff for their hard work with students–whether they are teaching a course, advising, coaching, or simply listening and providing encouragement. An email through campus announcement was sent out to all full-time and part-time students enrolled in spring 2022. For four weeks, from March 7 to April 4, students could complete a form online. The online thank-you notes were collected using a simple electronic template developed using Qualtrics XM™. Handwritten notes completed by students in person on campus were also collected. To collect the handwritten thank-you notes, staff and student assistants set up tables with thank-you cards for approximately four hours a day, twice a week, for the duration of two weeks.

Both electronic and handwritten thank-you notes were collected from students. In the spring of 2022, a total of 559 completed responses (376 online notes and 183 handwritten notes) were collected. A letter of thanks from the director of the center accompanied either a printout of the electronic notes or the handwritten notes. These were then distributed to the corresponding faculty or staff through the university mailing system. Among the 559 collected responses, the handwritten notes were transcribed electronically and were compiled with the online responses for analysis. Messages that contained a simple "thank you" apropos without other elements to analyze were discarded from the analysis. A total of 448 thank-you note messages were analyzed in this study.

Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was employed to analyze students' thank-you note messages. Using Maguire and Delahunt's (2017) steps for a theory-based thematic analysis, the data were analyzed in the following six phases: (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) generating initial theory-based codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining themes; and (6) writing-up. Applying the prominent work of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis

framework, Maguire and Delahunt offered explicit steps and suggestions for analyzing qualitative data that helped capture the patterns and themes of the data.

Once the research team completed the initial reading to become familiar with the data, a theory-based initial coding process took place. The data were initially coded using the principles and practices of humanizing pedagogy (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Through a comprehensive coding cycle and discussion, several categories and themes emerged: (a) forming trusting and caring relationships, (b) providing mentorship and one-on-one support; (c) commitment and passion to teaching the content, (d) providing meaningful content, and (e) engendering positive emotions. Based on these sub-themes, similar themes or categories were identified or merged. As these themes were defined, a final cycle of coding took place to create four major themes presented in the findings.

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) humanizing the teacher, (b) humanizing the student, (c) humanizing the course content, and (d) practicing humanizing pedagogy. While many comments provided general insights into the positive emotions the instructors or the course engendered, some valuable insights are presented in the following sections.

Humanizing the Teacher

The most significant theme that stood out in data analysis was the students' appreciation expressed toward the teachers' care, kindness, support, and 'humanness.' Principles in humanizing pedagogy correspond to the literature and research concerning caring education and pedagogy for diverse students, such as practicing active listening, respect, trust, and compassion toward the student (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Gay, 2018). Many messages from students expressed gratitude toward the humanization of the teacher as the students were able to receive care, trust, and compassion and forge a meaningful relationship with their teachers.

Communicating Care

Teachers' personal attention, care, and kindness were appreciated by many students. Sometimes, it was the teachers' approachable personality and availability to help the students that made an impact. Other times, the sense of belonging and the feeling of someone's care were significant to students' overall college experience. From the teacher's care and attention, many students formed long-term relationships and shared more than academic matters.

> "I wanted to thank you for making my last few semesters here worthwhile. I enjoyed your class a lot. It's hard to find a professor like you, and I'm glad I met you. You're so humble and always considerate of your students. You genuinely care about each and every one of us, and that is one of your best qualities…I hope you know how much I

appreciate that, and hope we get to stay in touch throughout the years. I wish to learn more from you" (Online_Msg 191).

Whether the relationship formed between the student and teacher lasted a semester or longer than a single semester, the interactions were impactful enough to have changed students' college lives in many ways.

In another case, one student's message expressed appreciation for the teacher's extended availability and the impact on the student's personal life.

> "I would like to take a moment to thank you for all the countless hours you have spent with me. You have been a personal mentor to me. Thank you for guiding me since last year. Your guidance really plays a huge role in shaping my personality and shaping my future. You supported and guided me when I was going through past trauma. Many people told me to just get over it, but you suggested taking the necessary steps to get out of the trauma. I feel so blessed and grateful to you for all the help you have provided me" (Online_Msg154).

During the course of a few months, the student found someone to confide in with difficult personal issues. Because of the teacher's compassion and guidance, the student also described developing coping mechanisms to help with traumas and personal difficulties. Similarly, another student's message described how helpful the relationship was at a critical time of transition in college.

> "When I first came here, I was scared and didn't feel like I belonged. And though it wasn't serious before, I was a bit depressed and started to feel worthless. But things got better when I met you during class…helped me get through my first semester here. You always greeted me every time I came to class and…you called my name out loud…I was able to open up to the class a lot more and crack some pretty bad jokes along the way. I felt safe in your class. I felt heard, loved, and finally felt like I actually belonged here…I got through my first semester here and was able to fight some personal issues, all thanks to you" (Online_Msg 190).

Numerous student messages reflect the impact of teachers' care on students' personal lives. The teachers' close attention, such as remembering students' names, support outside of the classroom, and availability to actively listen contributed to students feeling safe and a part of a larger community in college to overcome challenges and barriers.

Being a Mentor and Role Model

To some students, it was meaningful to form a relationship beyond the traditional TSR. Students expressed their admiration toward teachers who acted as role models in life and an inspiration to career pursuits. Also, many students showed gratitude toward teachers who provided mentorship in their overall college lives—thus preparing for a self-managed life.

Students' messages included the inspiration given by their teachers in various career paths. One student's comment discussed how the long-term relationship has inspired and shaped the student's future.

> "Someone who has been an inspiration and an individual who I look up to on a daily basis is Dr. S. I have had the opportunity to work with him for the past four years and to say that I've learned just a few things is a major understatement. He has taught me so much over the past few years and has been there every step of the way for my future. Even though this is my last semester at SBU I know I will never forget the times we spent together in labs. Thank you" (Card_Msg 108).

The teachers' support, guidance, and advice in and out of the classroom have impacted students' future goals and aspirations. Many students also appreciated the teachers' mentorship, which often lasted more than a single semester. Students viewed mentorship differently, but these mentoring relationships commonly influenced students long-term.

> "I want to thank you for seeing something in me during my very first semester here that has helped me completely transform over the last 2 years. My whole life, I was a shy, quiet kid who was afraid to speak in class and afraid to go after opportunities. Since you selected me to be a fellow in Fall 2020, I have gone on to be offered every position I've gone after…I appreciate the way that you took a special interest in me and equally cared deeply about all of the scholars' success. It is such a great quality to have, and I'm so glad I can call you not only my mentor but also my friend" (Online_Msg 132).

The mentorship of uplifting students, providing guidance in school and in life, and the continuous support encouraged students to form long-term, meaningful relationships with teachers. Furthermore, students' higher engagement, passion, and accomplishments were often indicators of a successful mentoring relationship.

The trusting and caring relationship formed between students and teachers had long-lasting effects on students' emotional states, college life, future aspirations, and personal or academic accomplishments. Because teachers showed how much they cared or extended their interaction beyond the boundaries of the classroom, students were able to see themselves and their futures in a new light. Students perceived teachers as mentors, role models, friends, or someone they could confide in rather than an authority figure.

Humanizing the Student

Aligned with the first principle of a humanizing pedagogy, teachers' efforts of advocating for the full development of a person were appreciated by many students. Students commented on the support and encouragement from the teachers beyond the course content, such as developing life skills. As teachers humanized themselves, they also made an impact by inspiring students and facilitating students' holistic development as empowered humans.

Developing Life Skills

Students acknowledged the various roles teachers played in their lives to develop co-curricular skills. Some skills students valued were leadership skills, time management skills, communication skills, and elevated self-esteem as a result of the interactions with their teachers.

Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, students struggled with the transition from in-person to online instruction, social networking, and time management. One student discussed how the teacher bridged these gaps and helped the student be more confident overall.

> "I came to the US in search of better education. I've seen power dominance by many teachers in my country, which felt so wrong! As I came to the US during COVID…I realized that it's hard to communicate with teachers online…even though my course was asynchronous, Professor K successfully managed to bridge the gap. I communicated with her throughout the semester, received feedback, and talked about my confusion during office hours…I also made my first college friend because of this class…I want to thank you for being such an amazing teacher and motivating me to be a better writer, boosting my confidence, and making a huge impact in my life!" (Online_Msg 82).

Another student described how the teacher's care and support boosted the student's self-esteem to feel more confident about choosing future career paths (Online_Msg 15). In addition to teaching the content in class, teachers helped and supported students in developing transferable skills to be successful in life after college.

Authentic learning experiences were appreciated despite the challenges of remote learning. Furthermore, given the unique challenges students face during the pandemic, the student was grateful for learning additional skills, such as time management and organizational skills.

> "I want to thank you for guiding me during my first real step into the filmmaking process. This is something I'm really looking to pursue, and COVID made it difficult to seek out any opportunities. I was worried about whether or not I'd be able to get any practice. But you helped with not only that but also organizing and my time management skills, which is something I really needed" (Online_Msg 7).

In many cases, students reported a more positive attitude toward their teachers because of the transformative experience they had as a result of the TSR. Beyond students' expectations, students walked out of their classes with more than a simple grade or knowledge of the subject matter. Instead of positioning students as recipients where they can deposit knowledge, teachers went beyond the banking model of teaching to promote students' holistic development and position them as co-creators of knowledge in the learning process.

Inspiring Future Professionals

Aligned with the aspect of humanizing the teacher as a mentor and role model, students described meaningful experiences with teachers that inspired them to pursue a career path or a field of study. Also, many student comments indicated how instructors sparked a new interest in certain fields or motivated students to continue on a path despite the barriers they encountered. In addition to facilitating a caring relationship, teachers acknowledged students' reality, resources, and skills to inspire and guide them.

Teachers' passion communicated through the course inspired students to rethink their future paths and interests. One student described how the teacher's care and passion contributed to the student's new interest in anthropology.

> "Thank you so much for introducing me to a completely new field that I hadn't previously considered and effectively changing my educational trajectory. You are a hub of resources and you help students find their passion. Thank you so much for all of the opportunities that you have shown me and being a passionate instructor who deeply cares for their subject" (Online_Msg 225).

Instead of simply depositing knowledge in students, many teachers modeled a teaching practice that encouraged students to see their learning as an opportunity for transformation and growth. Students appreciated teachers who viewed their academic endeavors as a part of a pathway toward success in their lives. Other student messages reflected the influence teachers had on their future career path and passion in various professional pursuits such as filmmaking (Card_Msg 72), literacy (Card_Msg 68), or social work (Card_Msg 134).

Another student's message indicated similar appreciation toward a teacher who shared more than course knowledge with the student.

> "Dr. F, I just want to say thank you for always sharing all the rich knowledge with me and other students. I especially enjoyed being your undergraduate research assistant because the process of doing research helped me discover myself" (Card_Msg 136).

A humanizing pedagogy focuses on students' resources and incorporates those resources into relevant learning experiences (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Huerta, 2011). The practical opportunities to work closely with the teacher as a research assistant influenced the student's development to find focus in their academic orientation and promoted personal growth.

Student messages included gratitude toward teachers for acknowledging them as an individual, not just one of many students in the class. The impact that lasted beyond one semester or beyond the boundary of the classroom created these positive emotions to appreciate TSR. Students' resources and experiences were valued, and students were treated as human beings who needed nurturing and growth beyond the classroom, which many teachers were able to instill through their interactions with the students.

Humanizing the Course Content

The teaching and learning strategies in the courses made a difference in students' levels of engagement and commitment in class. The instructional model that teaches effective learning strategies and enables students' self-assessment in humanizing pedagogy empowers students (Bartolomé, 1994). Many students mentioned their impression of teachers' commitment to teaching the course content. Furthermore, the manner in which the course content was delivered encouraged students to participate in the class.

Commitment to the Course

Many students described how impressed they were with the teachers' passion, commitment, knowledge, and expertise. Demonstrating both an affective and intellectual drive toward the content can contribute to students' motivation and interest in the course (Olszewska et al., 2021). It was evident in students' comments that teachers' personal commitment to the course content motivated students in many ways.

For instance, one student's message commented on the teacher's passion translated into positive energy throughout the course. This helped the student ease into the course and develop as much passion as the teacher had demonstrated in class.

> "Thank you, Professor S, for always going the extra mile for all of your students! Your passion and excitement for the courses you teach help keep class entertaining and I really appreciate the energy you bring to each class. Coming into PA school, I was definitely very nervous, but after meeting you for the first time…I felt so welcomed. I am so fortunate to have you as an advisor and professor. You are truly amazing and you are so appreciated!" (Online_Msg 92).

Passion and commitment to the course were communicated by the additional effort teachers put into the course and the students. This excitement, joy, and positive energy were received by students, who also found it helpful to learn in a space full of positive emotions.

Student messages commonly indicated teachers' commitment by mentioning how the teacher went above and beyond common teaching practices or the students' expectations. One student described how such efforts were shown in the class instruction.

> "Thank you for the many wonderful activities you do for students, for the dissemination of knowledge, and for the encouragement of the pursuit of knowledge. You go above and beyond your roles to support students, and from personal experiences with you, I am definitely grateful. I hope our paths will cross again sometime in the future" (Online_Msg 261).

The teaching method of using activity-based learning, encouraging students, and communicating passion for the course content translated into motivating students in their

academic journey. Because the teachers modeled such dedication and commitment, students were encouraged to pursue a similar path and feel excited about the subject matter, which brought joy to the classroom. Interconnected with the humanization of teachers and students, the humanization of content occurred with the teachers' extended availability and support for the students.

Making Course Content Meaningful

The manner in which the course content was taught, especially in challenging courses or topics, made an impression on students. Inspired by the teachers' passion and commitment to the field, there were more efforts dedicated to ensuring students' learning. Teachers' clear explanations, breaking down the concepts, and providing multiple examples were all efforts to make the course content more meaningful and helpful to students.

Students expressed appreciation and admiration toward the depth of knowledge reflected in the teachers' simple and clear explanations to help students easily understand the course material.

> "Thank you for being a great instructor. During the online sessions, you helped us out so much with teaching and doing labs with us. I thought that you conveyed the information very well and had a great depth of knowledge of electronics and manufacturing…The videos that we did were a great project for helping us understand the processes deeper. Thank you for teaching us and being very helpful when we didn't fully understand the topics" (Online_Msg 219).

In particular, students had positive feedback about teachers who made it easier for them to understand and grasp the material. The teachers' willingness to help or dedication to making the content comprehensible was evident in their enthusiasm toward the subject matter.

One student described how the teacher's dedication was shown in the level of enthusiasm, time spent explaining difficult concepts, and the amount of effort invested in creating an enjoyable learning environment.

> "Of all my classes, I look forward the most to attending your lectures because of the enthusiasm that you bring to the subject. You explain the topics very clearly and check in with us along the way to make sure we understand. I truly appreciate the effort that you put in to make this class as effective and enjoyable as possible, as well as your attention to making the subject as appealing and relevant for us as possible by connecting what we're learning to biological concepts" (Online_Msg 192).

Many students found it helpful when the course material made sense to them as they advanced in their academic program. A similar comment was made by a student illustrating how a particular prerequisite class helped in the following clinical field experience.

> "Thank you for being a great professor! And teaching us the best social work practices! I love hearing your stories and applying them to my own practice" (Card_Msg 141).

Sometimes, the content became relevant immediately as students made connections to real-life situations. Other times, the course content was deemed helpful because students were able to perform well in advanced-level courses. Teachers' passion informed their effort to provide a course curriculum that was meaningful, relevant, practical, and helpful for the students. Teachers also dedicated their time and effort to creating meaningful course content. These efforts of humanizing the course content were noticed and appreciated by students.

Practicing Humanizing Pedagogy

Humanization of pedagogy, in essence, is rejecting dehumanization in education. In the second principle of a humanizing pedagogy, del Carmen Salazar (2013) stresses how rote memorization and skill-and-drill practices perpetuate dehumanization. Thus, moving beyond the banking model and promoting critical reflection is imperative to transformation. Students appreciated teachers' efforts to incorporate innovative pedagogical practices, and a few students even elaborated on the new perspectives they gained through the course.

Moving Beyond the Banking Model

Instead of delivering long lectures, teachers incorporated pedagogical practices that would challenge the traditional banking concept in education, which refers to perceiving students as storing deposits that need receiving and filling (Freire, 1970). Many students illustrated the positive experiences they had with teachers by engaging in activities that empowered them as knowledge creators and learners.

One student highlighted the use of the Socratic discussion method in a class where the student found it enjoyable to participate.

> "Your course was always engaging and informative. I loved the Socratic discussions and the ideas you shared. Though there are some (very few) things we don't agree on, I always loved the discussion" (Online_Msg 91).

The Socratic style discussion, a formal open-ended discussion format, facilitated higher engagement from students, which is also known to enhance TSR (Fisher & Machirori, 2021). Such an alternative instructional format engaged students to have ownership of their own learning and, thus, empowered them as active participants and creators of knowledge.

Students were able to assess their own progress in learning and described how certain activities or strategies in class helped them learn better. One student recognized that the association with emotions through active recall sessions helped retain information.

"I love how you make the concept stick with us through active recall and create emotional attachment (cause there's a reason why you do that, that's how memory works!). Additionally, you also challenge our critical thinking skills to be good clinicians with "not so simple" materials and the up-to-date information that keeps us up at night" (Online_Msg 94).

Because the learning process actively involved the students instead of the teacher-centered approach, the student also showed appreciation for grappling with more complex materials in class. These opportunities helped the student think more deeply and critically about the current issues related to the subject matter.

Another student described how student-centered active learning strategies motivated the student to participate in class and engage in coursework.

"Thank you for making informatics much more interesting than it really is! Your energy and humor is contagious and there was never a boring day in class. This made it so much easier to leave a long day at work and come to class…I really enjoyed the debate project. Never once did the assignments feel like "work." Honestly, this was the best way to learn and retain information" (Online_Msg 17).

Through the experience of actively participating and engaging in the learning process, students realized the value of active learning. Many students found out that learning is more effective when it is enjoyable and includes the elements of students' true involvement. Contrary to the dehumanizing banking models, these learning methods encouraged students' active participation in class, which in turn, facilitated higher student engagement in overall learning.

Providing New Perspectives

Some students specifically described the transformative experiences they had with the teachers. These experiences helped students gain new perspectives, develop critical consciousness, and rethink inequity in their respective fields. While only a few student comments elaborated on these experiences, these were indicative of the level of impacts teachers made on students, as the student comments suggest future-oriented critical consciousness.

One student's message described how the course offered new perspectives concerning environmental issues. By rethinking items used in human's daily lives, the student gained understanding and new insights toward health and the environment.

"This class was an eye-opener for me. Before taking this class, I was always thinking about the impact of all the chemicals on our lives but I never realized how close to home those issues were. The fact that I was in my senior year and I was so ignorant about…the environmental issues plaguing our planet shows that something was missing from my education, and this class was the lighter to my deep and passionate

desire to fight for the health of our environment against human greed for money and power" (Online_Msg 115).

The impact made by the teacher encouraged the student to take action, as the student described, to "fight for the health of our environment." Similarly, another student explained how such a transformative experience motivated the student to raise awareness among friends and family.

> "I have reflected back on your class…offered us new perspectives on race, gender, bodies, and people that I had never heard before. Your ability to provide us with the knowledge for higher-level concepts in an introductory course was phenomenal. I…always felt encouraged to ask questions. As my knowledge and understanding have grown, I have tried to apply the techniques I observed from you to further spread my knowledge. Educating friends and family members on intricate social interactions is one of my favorite activities, and you gave me the tools and empowerment to do that successfully" (Online_Msg 35).

Teachers' efforts to help students develop critical thinking and critical consciousness were reflected in students' messages. Students appreciated the transformative experience that ignited their passion, prompted their interest, and provided them with new insights to reevaluate their surroundings that perpetuate inequity and oppressive systems.

Students also demonstrated their abilities to make connections between the course content and their practices in the field. One student illustrated the experience of critically viewing human behavior and the systems in occupational therapy.

> "Professor K always encourages us to think on a greater scale of how human behavior, actions, and systems affect other individuals around us, both locally and globally. This is critical to our education as Occupational Therapists who need an understanding of both micro and macro subjects…I'm grateful to have been a student of hers" (Online_Msg 171).

As highlighted in the principles of humanizing pedagogy, developing critical consciousness is fundamental to humanization. Teachers' efforts were often reflected in the way they make personal connections to learning or how they highlighted students' contributions to society in dismantling oppressive structures (Allen & Rossatto, 2009; Bell & Schniedewind, 1989). Teachers' humanizing pedagogical practices facilitated students' development of critical consciousness and critical reflection, leading to change-oriented action taken by students.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore TSR in relation to student engagement by analyzing emotions of gratitude through the lens of humanizing pedagogy. Findings from an analysis of thank-you note messages highlight a few implications for research and higher education teaching practice. First, the affect-driven humanizing pedagogy had positive effects on TSR

and student engagement. Student engagement theories stress students' holistic engagement in higher education, including cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social engagements (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kahu, 2013). The practices of humanizing pedagogy demonstrated the positive impacts of teachers' care and humanness on students' academic, social, and emotional engagement. The affect-driven caring pedagogy improved students' engagement, enhancing TSR as well as social interaction among peers. Furthermore, students reported more interest in the subject matter because of their close relationship with the teacher. As demonstrated by students' appreciation of the teachers' care, compassion, and mutual respect, humanizing pedagogy stems from the relationship between students and educators (del Carmen Salazar, 2013), which leads to students' holistic engagement and development as empowered humans.

Second, the pursuit of humanizing pedagogy was practiced in four interconnected dimensions: teacher, student, content, and pedagogy. In higher education contexts, students spend relatively less time with teachers, which poses challenges to practicing humanizing pedagogy or pursuing "mutual humanization" (Freire, 1970, p. 74). Similar to the multidimensional nature of student engagement (Maguire et al., 2017), humanizing pedagogic practices in higher education contexts revealed teachers' multidimensional practices (Olszewska et al., 2021). Teachers engaged with students by humanizing themselves and students through caring pedagogy and a holistic approach. Teachers also practiced the humanization of the content by modeling their passion and commitment and educating students with authentic content. Such humanizing pedagogy was also manifested in their innovative and critical teaching practices. Through this multidimensional practice of humanizing pedagogy, students were able to act as co-constructors of knowledge in the learning process.

Lastly, although teachers' humanizing pedagogy made positive impacts on students' engagement and emotions, limited evidence indicated teachers' individual and collective endeavors toward developing critical consciousness. In an investigation of higher education instructors' humanizing pedagogic beliefs and practices conducted by Olszewska and colleagues (2021), the authors highlighted the instructors' commitment to societal change amidst the corporatization of higher education and aggressive neoliberalism that dehumanizes the higher education community (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Desierto & De Maio, 2020; Olszewska et al., 2021; Seal, 2018). A few teachers in this study made an impact through their commitment to societal changes, and many taught against dehumanizing pedagogy. These efforts had positive effects on students' holistic engagement and acted as a catalyst for student empowerment and future-oriented transformation. As such efforts are critical to engaging in 'mutual humanization' (Freire, 1970), these few teachers' attempts to change-oriented student action and transformation need to be amplified.

Implication and Conclusion

This study calls attention to the importance of practicing humanizing pedagogy, especially in higher education contexts where teacher-student interaction is constrained by the neoliberal agenda and corporatization of higher education institutions. The findings of the study demonstrated how a positive TSR formed through practicing humanizing pedagogy could

create emotions that made significant impacts on student engagement and empowerment. Through the humanization of learning and the invitational stances of instructors, students were motivated and willing to assume critical roles in the process of constructing knowledge and developing critical consciousness. Moreover, a program such as the Thank-a-Teacher initiative provides an effective way and a safe space for students to acknowledge emotions and communicate their needs while also motivating the instructors to further engage with the students. This is particularly important when students come from diverse social, cultural, linguistic, or racial backgrounds. In addition to offering students an opportunity to humanize their instructors and the process of learning, the program generates valuable information for instructors to understand diverse students' learning needs to provide equitable access to higher education.

The findings of this study suggest future directions for research and practice in higher education. Further examination of higher education teachers' principles and practices of humanizing pedagogy in and out of the classroom will provide in-depth insights into understanding effective pedagogical approaches focused on student engagement, empowerment, and transformation amid the diversification of higher education community that demands a range of students' emotional, social, and academic needs to be met. Furthermore, an analysis of the long-term effects of humanizing pedagogy can indicate various possibilities and promising approaches toward the humanization of higher education through TSR. As emphasized by del Carmen Salazar (2013), education should be a space for students to feel supported in their identity development through "achievement, purpose, power, and hope" (p. 141). The positive emotions created by humanizing pedagogy bring us hope–a central concept in Freierean ideology of humanization and liberation. Thus, we stress hope for higher education instruction to engender revolutionary and transformative education that will extend our individual and collective endeavors toward humanization and liberation.

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