Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology, Vol. Vol. 12, Special Issue, pp.39-54.
doi: 10.14434/jotlt.v12i1.36549

A Technology-Supported Course Throughline: Centering Student Voice and Agency to Create a Belonging Context

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Abstract: This reflective essay discusses a course redesigned to enhance student belonging and the important role intentional use of technology plays in creating a belonging context. Before the redesign, some course elements aimed to create a belonging context by centering and valuing student choice, and through choice, respect of identity. However, there were gaps in the pedagogical tactics related to considering the students' psychological experience as part of the class. The course redesign focused on procedures that centered student agency and voice as the core of a class learning community. Technological refinements using an online discussion tool called CN Post, strategic uses of the course LMS, implementation of anonymous review using Qualtrics, and self-publication of a student written book using Pressbooks relied on brave space discussion and solidified a co-created, course throughline in which all student voices mattered and belonged, emotionally and intellectually, to class process and learning outcomes.

Keywords: agency, voice, backward course design, learning community, brave space

For over a decade, my fall teaching load has included a three-credit hour course called "Black Markets: Supply and Demand." This intensive writing course is available for honors students seeking a liberal arts degree and business certificate from a large midwestern university's College of Arts and Sciences. When I proposed the course, I was told to expect broad disciplinary diversity among my students. This advice proved true: most years the number of disciplines my students are majoring in is close to the number of students enrolled in my class, which on average is capped at an enrollment of 18. Expecting this diversity of disciplines pushed and continues to push me to design the course to be highly approachable and inclusive, by centering and valuing student choice in assessments, discussion, and class activities. In short, I am concerned with having the course connect meaningfully with my students, and I believe a threshold goal is to open connections between my students and the course concepts, the students themselves, and the students and me. I acknowledge these threshold goals can be achieved without using technology; however, my students and I do strategically use technology to make these connections. These uses have become more strategic, and more explicitly planned to create a belonging context, as I have gained "wisdom" teaching the class.

One experience that provided a large pivot in my teaching took place in fall 2015. A few students articulated that the course led them to develop a sense of hopelessness due to the revelations about the types, workings, harshness, adaptability, and ubiquity of black markets we encountered in our studies. For example, one response to the course evaluation question "What did you like least about this course" stated that "the class often ends on a sad and depressing note which makes me feel helpless about changing the world." This feedback hit me hard and triggered a course redesign, as it diametrically opposed a desired outcome that my students could envision themselves as leaders capable of making a positive difference in an ethically complex globalized world. I had seen their work over the first five years of teaching the class and believed my described learning outcome was realistic.

In response to this feedback and in light of my belief in my students, I asked myself "how can I revise the course so that my students see that the course belongs to them as a community of learners with me as a guide?" My short answer is that I maintained the previous learner-centered approaches

on class projects and class discussion, and I boosted the role of student agency and voice in every class meeting, increased diverse perspectives introduced through course readings and resources to challenge Western-dominated thinking and to model valuing of different perspectives, and reconceptualized a final project founded on the students' emerging expertise. Uses of technology were crucial to centering student voice and spotlighting their emerging expertise in a *course throughline*. This paper describes and analyzes how this course's design leverages technology to generate a course throughline that (1) belongs to my students individually and communally and (2) builds and supports sense of belonging.

Designing a Student-Owned Course Throughline

The term *throughline* was coined by Konstantin Stanislavski to describe a character in a play's sequence of actions that grounded the character's main objective—he called it a *super objective* (Sawoski, 1984, p. 6). In the teaching and learning context the term relates to the quality of connections between learning activities, assessments, and learning outcomes (Lim, et al., 2023; see Cope & Kalantzis, 2020). To plan high-quality connections, I engage in backward course design, starting by identifying learning outcomes, then identifying assessments, then learning activities, and then finally resources (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). I then organize a macro-level structure built primarily with manageable chunks of course content and low stakes assessment with a logical flow. With an overarching structure in place, I identify ways to emphasize what Hattie (2009) refers to as *visible learning*. Hattie describes visible learning:

> Visible teaching and learning occurs when learning is the explicit goal, when it is appropriately challenging, when the teacher and the student both (in their various ways) seek to ascertain whether and to what degree the challenging goal is attained, when there is deliberate practice aimed at attaining mastery of the goal, when there is feedback given and sought, and when there are active, passionate, and engaging people (teacher, student, peers, and so on) participating in the act of learning. It is teachers seeing learning through the eyes of students, and students seeing teaching as the key to their ongoing learning. The remarkable feature of the evidence is that the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers. When students become their own teachers, they exhibit the self-regulatory attributes that seem most desirable for learners (self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-assessment, self-teaching) (p.22).

To emphasize visible learning, I have designed a sequence of activities giving voice and agency to my students through discussions that take place pre-class, in class, post class, reinforced in a mid-semester activity, and in the class's major project. Importantly, the visible learning determines the throughline, and it emphasizes the value of each student's contribution to the collective learning. For purposes of this reflective essay, the use of technology to memorialize the throughline is emphasized in the essay and vital to establishing a belonging context. Memorializing the throughline involves three technology tools: CN Post (an online discussion tool), the course homepage in Canvas, my institution's LMS, and Pressbooks.

Establishing the Throughline

Pre-class preparation calls on the students to respond to assigned reading and sets the stage for in-person class discussion. Students have one of two task roles in the pre-class preparation, which takes place in CN Post, although any online discussion platform would work. A student is assigned *task role one* for

each class, and over the course of the semester, each student will take on this role.[1] Twenty-four hours before class, the student assigned posts three to five discussion worthy ideas provoked by the assigned reading. I call these ideas "Relevant Big Ideas" (RBIs) named after a protocol designed by Indiana University Professor of Education Daniel Hickey.

All other students are assigned *task role two*. Students in task role two have 24 hours prior to class to reply to one of the proposed RBIs. The reply must begin with a question provoked by the RBI. The reply also includes two sentences after the question: one justifying the importance of the question and a second citing something from the reading that is relevant to the question. In CN Post, the threaded discussion reply is called a "reflection." The name will vary by online discussion tool, but it should be clear which RBI the question pertains to.

As follow up, *in class* the student assigned task role one serves as the discussion leader, with my support, and uses the other students' questions as starting places for interrogating the reading. *Post class*, the discussion leader (the student assigned task role one) writes three to five summary RBIs, which are five-sentence paragraphs that identify and explain takeaways from our reading and discussion. The first time a student is in task role one, they share their RBI summary with the class for feedback. Once they incorporate the feedback, they post the RBI summary, which we call Final RBIs, on the course homepage. In Canvas, the student uses the Pages tool to post the Final RBIs. Pages in Canvas have their own unique URL, and I add a link on the course homepage to the Final RBIs. At this point, each learner has contributed questions, participated in discussion, and provided feedback for the RBI summary which reflects the students' co-created takeaways from reading and class discussion. These posted RBIs accrue over the semester memorializing the learning community's intellectual engagement with the reading and each other.

Three other points are worth making here. First, not all questions the students ask while in task role two are created equal for nurturing discussion. Opportunity to ask questions such as in an active learning class and developing an understanding of a "hierarchy" of question types leads to an improved ability to ask questions (Marbach-Ad & Sokolove, 2000). Therefore, during the class after the first questions are posted, I guide students in a reflection about "quality discussion questions." Second, once the student posts the Final RBIs, they complete a guided reflection on the helpfulness of each classmate's feedback and then each classmate then receives the feedback on their feedback. A technology tool called Kritik, or even email, can manage the feedback process. This process contributes to high expectations for providing feedback. These high expectations are vital in this course as the task of the major project is to write a publishable work for a class book. The third point is that many Final RBIs accrue over the course of the semester, which means that careful design of the LMS homepage is important, not only because students can easily navigate a well-designed page and course site, but also because the homepage emphasizes the visible throughline of learning.

Reinforcing the Throughline—RBI Mapping Exercise

By the time we reach the halfway point of the semester, the students will have read two books, additional readings, and we will have amassed about 70 to 80 Final RBIs. At this point, my students review the full set of Final RBIs to generate main themes of the course to date as follows:

1. I have the students work in small groups, with each group drafting proposed themes.
2. Each group then selects a representative to work with the other groups' selected representatives to come to consensus on no more than five main themes.

[1] The black markets class is a seminar capped at eighteen students: I would adjust the process for a larger class.

3. I share to all students a numbered list of all the RBIs to date.
4. Each student then separately assigns (maps) each Final RBI to one, and only one, of the themes articulated by the class.
5. I compile the data in a spreadsheet and share it with my students 24 hours before the next class.
6. In the subsequent 24 hours, each student reviews the data, composes a thesis statement that they believe the data supports, and posts it in CN Post.
7. In the next class, we discuss the diversity of the thesis statements, the nature of the data itself, and our methodology to come to themes. We can be self-critical about where we landed on our themes or our methodology. We also communally reflect on what we are learning in the class and what it means for us as members of our local communities and as global citizens.
8. Following this class, each student sets SMART goals about contributing to the class community and meets with me to review the goals.[2]

Finalizing the Throughline: A Class Publication

To respond to the wide variety of student interests and majors, in the students' capstone work, they write about a course-related topic in a genre that most interests them: a research study, a movie review, book review, traditional essay, or even creative works. Around 2015, I began wishing I had encouraged my students to publish their works--the quality was high, and ideas worth sharing. By the time, I taught the course in 2018, the university had arranged a university-wide license with an authoring and book-publishing platform called Pressbooks. Thus, I was able to reimagine the course's capstone project as one in which the students author a peer-reviewed publication.

The publication extends the throughline into the capstone project and beyond the bounds of our class. As part of the publication, the students jointly compose an introduction. They return to a process similar to our mid-semester RBI mapping exercise and identify themes. They map each students' work to these themes. They engage in vibrant conversation as they prepare to publish the work. Once it is published, it is read beyond our university, which is clear as others have uploaded volumes to Merlot and at least one other university uses volumes for course readings.

The project itself is highly scaffolded. For example, at the stage of thesis formation, we have a one-class-period event I call "thesis paragraph speed dating"—a protocol in which every student receives feedback from every other student and me.[3] In the second half of the semester, the students complete multiple drafts and receive feedback multiple times. We use an anonymous review process managed in the online survey tool Qualtrics. And no student can publish their work until the class agrees it is ready for inclusion in the class's volume of the *Perspectives on Black Markets* series.

Intentionality of a Throughline

Establishing a throughline across a course requires intentionality. Fung's (2015) *The Connected Curriculum* helps with understanding a successful throughline as a sense that the components of a

[2] During the semester, my students develop SMART goals multiple times. I encourage them to add one goal every week. They have freedom on the direction of their goals, except for the first time when I ask them to set goals for their writing skills and following the RBI mapping exercise when I ask them to set goals for contributing to the classroom community.

[3] This activity can occur in person or online using tools such as Zoom breakout rooms, kumospace, or SpatialChat. Kumospace allows "avatars" to move around a room. Sound in a kumospace room is distance sensitive—the closer you are to an avatar the more you hear only that nearby avatar, which simulates the experience of moving between conversations in an in-person space. SpatialChat is another technology similar to kumospace.

curriculum are "joined up." A curriculum wide throughline, which is possible to engineer, poses challenges that I did not face. For instance, my vision for the course did not require the buy-in from other faculty that is sometimes necessary for a curricular throughline; so, establishing trust among faculty colleagues was never an issue. Particular strategies, such as carrying topics through the course, were easy for me to decide on at a macro level. And since I had a clear story arc for the semester[4], it was easy for me to describe it in the syllabus and use the story as a touchstone during the semester.

In the more complex curricular throughline, technology is indispensable as a way to create connections among courses. Yerworth et al. (2018) describe the use of a resource module included in all courses in a curriculum with a link on the homepage of each course's LMS site as one way to leverage technology. Similarly, I leveraged the LMS so that each aspect of the throughline was accessed on the course homepage, which of course is the highest level of the course site. I believe this signaled the value of the student work visually and organizationally.

Leveraging the Throughline to Support a Belonging Context

A belonging context, or "place of belonging," requires appropriate policies, practices, procedures, and relationships to produce places of non-prejudice (Student Experience Research Network, 2018). Terms associated with a belonging context include "identity," "agency," "voice," "trust," and "respect." And notably "hope" (Student Experience Research Network, 2018). Much of belonging research studies sense of belonging at the institutional level (Kinzie et al., 2020); however, the research also concludes that student development of develop sense of belonging follows from experiences taking classes (Freeman et al., 2007; Tyton Partners, 2023).

To design the course for a belonging context, student agency and student self-regulation of progress toward goals and outcomes are vital. Applying backward course design effectively will inform students of learner-centered outcomes, which encourages students to view learning as a proactive activity instead of as something a teacher creates (Zimmerman, 2001). A proactive activity becomes self-regulated when the students continuously monitor progress toward a goal (Berk, 2003). This monitoring requires awareness and reflection on outcomes to redirecting unsuccessful efforts. To facilitate this monitoring, these outcomes must be visible to the students.

Strategic uses of technology set up and facilitate student monitoring of learning, which with careful design, creates community and a belonging context. The Tyton Partners (2023) recently surveyed 2000 students and found that digital learning tools can be used to create learning communities that in turn foster a sense of belonging.[5] Gray et al. (2018) describe three types of structures that are important for a belonging context: *interpersonal opportunity structure*, *instructional opportunity structure*, and *institutional opportunity structure*. Designing a course with interpersonal opportunity structures facilitates social ties between students and between students and instructors. Instructional opportunity structures provide avenues for students to make meaning from perspectives that they hold in high regard. Institutional opportunity structures move beyond the classroom and address belonging at a school or in the school's community. The interpersonal and instructional

[4] The course's overarching objective is "As we consider black markets and their relationship to our lives, we empower ourselves to think from multiple perspectives, we challenge our understanding of ethical decision-making, we map our place in the global marketplace, and we clarify our influence on far-flung markets and far-flung markets' influence on us." The course parses into logical chunks, beginning with an exploration of black markets and their global spread and connections, moving to human conditions that motivate suppliers and consumers in these markets, and our relationship to the markets, and reaching basics of ethical decision-making. By the end of the semester, the students are expected to articulate how they will act as ethical leaders in the complex global marketplace.

[5] Tyton Partners' Center for Higher Education Transformation is a strategy consulting firm for companies and educational organizations.

opportunity structures are analogous to Garrison's (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which relies on three "presences": social, cognitive, and teaching. *Social presence* involves identifying with a group, a trusting environment, and ability to participate as a unique individual. It is a highly relationship-based aspect of the CoI. *Cognitive presence* is when the members of the class can connect with the content to be learned and confirm understanding through engaging with the CoI. *Teaching presence* is, at its most essential, guiding the social and cognitive learner engagement.

Both the opportunity structure model and CoI model give a guided mindset to rely on when planning a belonging context. The crux of the matter is that with intentionality, instructors can design courses rich with belonging opportunities by applying well-researched practices (Mendoza & Venables, 2023). For example, Mendoza and Venables' systematic review of the literature found that the CoI model and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2018) were widely used approaches to facilitate a belonging context.

Application to My Course

In my course, once I applied backward course design and drafted an overarching logical flow in a course map, I was able to analyze the map from the perspective of creating a belonging context. I found that using the online discussion tool, the LMS course site, and Pressbooks allowed me to not only design for visible learning in a throughline but also to assure the visible learning supported a belonging context. First, the use of the online discussion tool made student observations and questions about the reading the visible spine of the course. Second, this spine connected to and focused our in-person discussions in class because we had a goal as a group of helping the discussion leader finalize observations about the reading, which are the outcomes of our group learning process posted on the homepage of our course site. Third, these visible outcomes then nourish additional discussion at the mid-point of the course, and in our final group project--the publication of the class's *Perspectives on Black Markets*

Operationalizing Structure for Belonging

This plan operationalizes structures for a belonging context. These can be considered through the lens of the CoI framework (Gray, et al., 2018), or UDL principles. The day-to-day use of the online discussion tool and its connection to class discussion centers student voice related to our class, even between class meetings, and gives the students agency over the foci of each class day. Importantly, interactions contribute to a sense of belonging (Freeman, et al., 2007), especially for students who frequently discuss course content with other students outside class (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). From the CoI perspective, the process creates student presence and cognitive presence. From a UDL perspective, it also allows students to make meaning of our reading in ways that mattered to them. My presence is felt as a guide, though not discussion leader during class, as I share my expertise by injecting commentary or follow up questions. For example, I often find that during class I push the discussion by saying, "I believe we can consider this question further, for instance…" or by providing a vivid example of a black-market activity I confronted or read about in my role as an immigration attorney. Thus, my presence further centers and elevates the questions posted online by my students.

The structures leverage technology, building to our course publication by centering student voice and agency. The publication itself magnifies student voice and agency, and the assignment design relies on UDL principles. We use the Pressbooks platform as our publishing platform. Creating a book produces a URL to the publication, with the choice of making the book private or public. We make the book public; however, my students have the choice of uploading their work to the semester book, or if they should choose not to publish their work, they can turn it in directly to me. After seven

semesters, no student has opted out of publishing their work. Pressbooks also publishes text and many types of multi-media. Student projects can include videos, pictures, charts, graphs, google earth projects, text, or a blend. Beyond choice of media, students also choose their topic, which is vital given their disciplinary diversity. Thus, the genre and variety of topics vary dramatically. We have published movie reviews that reveal the accuracy of black-market depictions in the subject movie, an essay analyzing the United States' WWII anti-black-market propaganda posters, fact-based short stories that scrutinize counterfeit goods or human trafficking, and a flow chart that uses pictures and text to analyze connections of retail clothing sold locally to overseas production that relies on black market employment. Finally, each publication includes a class-written introduction. The students tend to use google documents for the drafting phase then upload the final draft to Pressbooks. They learn about meta-data and alt-text when they include multi-media and the impact on accessibility.

Culminating Belonging: The Publication as the Final Class Deliverable

The build to the publication relies on the establishment of our learning community through quality interaction. Quality interactions have multiple dimensions: spirit, trust, frequency, and commonality of expectation (Rovai, 2002). Rovai described "spirit," and "trust" as creating a tone as members of a community embrace commonality of expectations—in a class this expectation relates to learning. Spirit, or community spirit, requires a sense of connectedness with the group, and "trust" has two components: credibility that members can be relied on and benevolence that learners are genuinely interested in each other (Rovai, 2002). The concepts of spirit and trust dovetail well with Strayhorn's (2019) description of mattering, "we feel like we matter when we play important roles, when we feel like others depend on us, and when we command others' attention such that our absence does not go unnoticed" (p. 15).

Spirit and trust are evident in the review process for the major publication. The reviews take place in the Qualtrics online survey tool. The class is designed so anonymous review occurs after the class has developed community spirit, trust, relationships, and commonality of expectations through the earlier aspects of the course. After receiving and reading the anonymous feedback in a Qualtrics report, each student receives class time to ask for additional suggestions or clarifications. The students also meet with me one on one. The students could opt to avoid seeking or providing feedback, but this avoidance does not happen. The students could shy away from improving their work based on the feedback; however, they do not. Their authentic engagement with their peers' perspectives is evident in the tone and content of our one-on-one meetings. It is clear to me that belonging is a factor in student behaviors to embrace feedback through technology within our community.

Leveraging the Throughline to Include Student Thinking on Diverse Source Materials

The throughline and its co-creation are the visible outcome of the class's belonging context, but student agency and voice are the fuel that leads to the outcomes. During a panel discussion on belonging, Gregory Walton, Associate Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, answered the question "What is the role of students being aware of and enhancing their own belonging?" He spoke about agency, saying "Students have lots of agency at higher levels. They need mindsets that empower them to use that agency. Context needs to empower that agency and allow it to become productive and effective" (Student Experience Research Network, 2018). Thus, I include learner agency as a component of a belonging context and design my course for online interactions that integrate with the classroom as a place of belonging. Bandura (2006) says of agency that "To be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (p. 164). We can see students act with agency in class and if a course is designed to facilitate expressions of voice online. For example, Mitra

(2004) found that students asserting their voice is significant in the growth of agency, belonging, and competence (p. 681).

Student Voice and Respect

Mitra's finding makes sense as using voice is a visible act. The act involves cognitive ability, an actual physical action, and it has an emotional component related to confidence which is seen in taking the risk to interject. The response to the interjections, whether verbal or non-verbal, can reinforce confidence or lead to future hesitance or trepidation to further voice one's thoughts. In light of definitions of belonging, it makes sense that a learner who risks voicing thoughts will sense belonging if respected for taking risk and revealing their thinking, especially if they are encouraged, even expected, to contribute, and if they see and hear that their contributions are valued and matter to the classroom community. Evidence of this respect, encouragement, contribution, and valuing will emerge (or not) from the quality of interactions, whether virtual or in person, whether using technology or not. And this respect grounds further discussion and ongoing learning in the community. For example, Mora (2021) found that emphasizing the importance of the community and empathetic respect of ideas, even those with which we do not agree, contributes to students' successful collective action. In my classroom, learner agency is recursively and repeatedly reinforced as the class leans into the influence of each learner's voice through online discussion and interactions that ultimately lead to the learning community's expression of their final RBIs on our course homepage. In other words, agency and voice are activated through following the class's policies, procedures, and practices and are visible because of the strategic uses of technology. Respect in our classroom comes alive.[6]

Voice and Diverse Perspectives

This logical flow and frequent interactions, with my guidance, support engaging in brave contributions and more generally a context of belonging. We set the stage for these brave contributions by jointly drafting a first-day social justice. These statements typically show a commitment to empathy, openness to and encouragement of other perspectives, and an overarching respect for learning. For example, the Fall 2023 statement I as follows:

> I believe that an important purpose of higher education is growth through learning. The learning should empower all members of the learning community (faculty and students) to improve continuously and to contribute to the commonwealth in ways that they find meaningful. This purpose means behaviors and language in the classroom should challenge us, and may cause intellectual tension or even discomfort, but they must not diminish other members of the learning community. In this class, we will respect your religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, political opinions, mental, cognitive, and physical well-being, and other characteristics that you cannot or should not be required to change because they are fundamental to identity. This respect requires all members of the learning community to listen actively, be open to new opinions, and monitor themselves for indications of bias so as not to

[6] Regarding respect, 64% of students comment, in the course evaluations, on the positive quality of our in-class discussions; no student provided negative feedback on the discussions. A representative response to the question "What did you like most about this course and instructor?" addresses our discussions and the classroom community more generally. An example comment is, "He always treated us equally in class and spoke to us with respect. It did not feel like a traditional lecture, but rather a 1–hour conversation among colleagues and friends."

diminish others in our class discussions or activities. The behavioral principle put simply is that we challenge ideas, but do not diminish others.

This commitment nurtures organic co-creation of the course throughline and moves us toward establishing a brave space in the class, which according to De Novais (2021), requires academic grounding by establishing the connection between content and the academic culture. Abbott (2016) says it is not easy for students to "take those leaps or for faculty members to support them."

This section of the essay discusses not only methods to empower student voice to take the leaps but also the importance of discussing content emanating from diverse perspectives. It details changes in course content to make the class more inclusive, with inclusion as a pathway for voice and agency as described by Claude Steele, American social psychologist and a Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, and Mary Murphy, Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences at Indiana University (Student Experience Research Network, 2018). Steele said "Education is not a colorblind experience. One way is not easily trusted for persons from different backgrounds." In this exchange Murphy added, "Value diversity. Give voice to difference."

Further, in Spring 2021, I began co-authoring a series of modules to promote faculty knowledge and use of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in higher ed teaching. This co-authoring experience meant I reflected, often, on my own classes which inspired a rethinking of my "Black Markets: Supply and Demand" class, in particular. While the black markets class was already built on student choice as far as major projects, my reflections on course content poignantly revealed that I needed to decolonize the reading list. This effort led to policy, practice, and relational changes in my class. The changes impacted virtual and in-person components of the class. Moreover, the new reading list had the added benefit of leading my students to a deepened, learner-articulated understanding of the need for and power of agency as a foundation for belonging in society.

A high-level description of my black markets class is that my students and I consider types of persuasion at play in economic, and specifically, black-market activity. Our first text, *McMafia*, traces globalization of black markets, and touches on countries in every continent except Australia and Antarctica. The author, Glenny (2008), subtitles the book "A Journey through the Criminal Underworld." Through the author's investigative journalism, the students confront the bad, the ugly, and sometimes the good pertaining to black-market activity. This rich context sets up the class's grappling with the role of the human element that powers economies, and particularly with theories of persuasion and complementary concepts such as biases and ethics. These concepts matter, of course, both from the perspective of the persuader (supply side) and the potentially persuaded (demand side).

In 2020 when I reflected on the reading list and resources relevant for our discussions, I realized all my authors were white, and mostly men thinkers, such as Edward Bernays. In my first two years teaching the course, I had some racial diversity among the authors we read. Specifically, I assigned a novel, *The White Tiger,* by Arvind Aadiga (2008), which put the concepts of entrepreneurship and ethics in discussion. *The White Tiger* is written as a series of letters from the narrator describing for the premier of China his perspective on what it takes to be an entrepreneur. In 2012, I removed the *White Tiger* and substituted it with the book *Charlatan* by Pope Brock (2008), which is a non-fiction, but almost unbelievable account of a highly successful American huckster during the first half of the 20th century.

As I attempted to revise my class to include more diverse perspectives, I struggled to find "replacements" for the concepts presented by the authors on the class reading list. While it is obvious that persuasion in many forms serves as life blood of markets globally, calling it "persuasion" did not resonate beyond Western schools of thought. In fact, even diverse groups in the United States came at the topic differently. For example, the ways the African American community has approached

influence required rethinking the framing of my reading list. I could not identify an African American Bernays or Cialdini coming at the question explicitly from a Western perspective, a perspective which, by the way, was deployed against black causes historically (Jones, 2009). I had to ask myself, what reading would present my class contrasting ways of thinking about influence?

Ultimately, I added two readings to the curriculum in place of *Charlatan*--Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1963) *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and Sudhir Venkatesh's (2008) *Gang Leader for a Day*. I was confident about the former and nervous about the latter, which is an ethnographic study of the economy during the 1990s in a Chicago project where an African American community lived. *Gang Leader* includes quotations that rely on the insider language of the project and a rich depiction of life there, which financially-speaking was largely supported by the underground economy.

Putting my fears aside, I chose to trust my students, who were second-year college students enrolled in an interdisciplinary honors certificate program. I decided to have the class come to consensus on a social justice policy because of including *Gang Leader*. With the policy in place, after two years with the new readings, I conclude that these readings add richness and depth to our understanding of the human element in the economy and inspire excellent questions. These are visible in our course throughline.

Also, reading *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, in particular, had a profound reinforcing undertone about the importance of agentic action. King's letter (1963) contextualizes marginalization of African Americans, as both the law and norms created barriers to equitable democratic and social participation in the American commonwealth. King's descriptions are rife with examples of the disrespect, othering, and devaluing faced by African Americans. Sails-Dunbar (2017) equates King's description of marginalization with a Freirean "limit situation," or in other words, as one that inhibits self-agency. For example, King said:

> For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied (p.768)"

For King, all people have agency and should use that agency: "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed (p. 768)." Sails-Dunbar (2017) explains that King's letter describes how to take moral agentic action (p. 145. And what does King want to happen as a result of these actions? He says, "We have waited for more than 340 years for our God-given and constitutional rights" (p. 768). I explicate this reading here because King's call to action is about belonging; this amplifies the students' reading of materials directly related to belonging.

The notion that belonging can be achieved through activism has another interesting facet. Sulé and Brown (2023) highlight activism at the intersection of diversity and agency finding that black students who engage in anti-racist activism cultivated a sense of belonging. Whereas Sulé and Brown (2023) identify the mediating power of voice to create belonging, Pym & Kapp (2013) identify how a South African tertiary educational institution developed flexibility with the curriculum itself to activated student agency, with increased sense of belonging as an outcome. In sum, the evidence points to the importance of agency and sense of belonging in contexts where othering and prejudice have been the legal and cultural standard.

Student Voice in our Class Community

At the time the class readings reinforce the importance of voice and agency, the students exemplify this importance as they engage with the readings. They elevate their co-created thinking about the underground economies in marginalized America to our course throughline, giving voice to their growing perspectives on inclusion or exclusion. As they participate in the course, they reinforce their understanding of the power of agency in the Civil Rights Movement. This growth is visible as a large part of the course throughline specifically in online discussion, in class, and ultimately on the homepage of our course LMS.

Earlier in this section of the essay, I mentioned that I choose to trust my students. Indeed, teacher trust of students appears to mediate student connectedness (Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012). A sample of my students' online discussion of MLK's letter is in the Appendix. It demonstrates why I trust my students to engage bravely, earnestly, and openly as they pose questions about topics such as justice versus law, oppression, urgency in action, freedom, leadership, and following. My students also resonate with the reading and subsequent discussions with a majority stating they considered the reading and discussions a positive highlight of the course. As the students progress through the semester, the technology-supported preparation and follow- up discussion become the memorialized heart of the course and demonstrable record of collective intellectual connectedness and belonging through technology.

Conclusion

While I always approached the design of this class from a learner-centered perspective, having taught it over a dozen semesters led to many refinements of policies, practices, and procedures. The most important refinements occurred as I designed with a laser-like focus on creating a belonging context. Nurturing a belonging context in a class is complicated, like the definition of sense of belonging itself. This essay describes a course redesigned with intentional combination of course design (including materials and activities around student voice), pedagogy, and strategic use of technology to address these complexities. The combination creates a throughline of visible co-created content and evidence of mattering. Specifically, the interplay of changes, including the non-technological ones, enhances student agency, centers student voice, establishes trust in peer feedback, communicates very high but appropriate expectations, and reinforces the embracing of difference as vital to our growth as individuals and as a learning community. An important takeaway is that many of the pedagogical and course design practices described in the literature as best practice are powerful tools for designing courses for a belonging context. Moreover, many technology tools increase our ability to reinforce a belonging context when strategically incorporated into a well-designed course.

In sum, I suggest six actions to enhance a belonging context in a course. While it is likely many courses or contexts may not be amenable to fully embracing each of these actions, most of the actions are reasonable steps for most courses:

1. Use backward course design.
2. Identify a macro-level logical flow for chunks of content and low stakes assessments to make learning visible regularly throughout the course.
3. Analyze the logical flow to assure the learning process will result in a student-created throughline.
4. Yield the micro-level class day focus to students and use technology to honor their foci by making it visible.
5. Include diverse source material discussed in brave spaces.

6. Use technology throughout the course to memorialize and appreciate each student's and the learning community's visible learning.

All in all, student engagement in this course, in which technology plays a vital role, has given me incredible hope in my students' abilities and motivations. Seeing them succeed actually strengthens my sense of hope generally. As my students complete this class, they become the throughline. They know they matter. And while the course considers black markets and the human element that drives the markets, the course is not really about black markets. It is about my students and their growth achieved through participation in a learning community to which we all clearly belong.

Appendix

Appendix 1. Proposed RBIs and questions after reading MLK's Letter to Birmingham Jail.

Main point 1: A law may be just in writing, but unjust in application.
Student 1: What happens when a law is just to someone and unjust to another? If the law is not just to everyone shouldn't the law be seen as unjust as a whole? Since laws can be misinterpreted in writing, and injustice may not be known until the law is put into action, those who see the law as just may not understand the injustice they are causing just yet.

Student 2: Who determines if the law is just or unjust in application? Everything in life gets misinterpreted in some way, shape, or form. When this happens who is the one to determine that a law is being unjust in its application. People who look at a law differently than someone else could interpret it in their own way. This happens all the time with something as simple as a grocery list from your mom. In everyday life, there is something that is misinterpreted. When something like this occurs the ability to determine the justness of an application is extremely ambiguous.

Student 3: Should there be a more adaptive judicial review process? We all know how long it can take for laws, particularly long-standing ones, to change. But is that bad? Would hastening the process lead to more confusion and error? Or would it simply make for better laws, and everything else is overthinking it. I think it could even be both, if we tread carefully.

Main point 2: Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor.
Student 4: How can we apply this thinking of "now is the time to act" to modern-day issues of injustice? I know people like to wait until a situation escalates to a crisis before acting, so I think MLK's letter really resonates today. When we are faced with injustice, such as police brutality or climate change, the time to act is always now. Waiting for permission or when the time is right just pushes the issue off into the future.

Student 5: How is the timing of resources collection and finding leadership important to the start of social justice issues? With the example of MLK, there would not have been as big of an impactful blow to society without the support of the accumulated resources and leadership of someone brilliant like MLK. Without the resources and leadership, the impact might not have been as great as what it was, or there would have been a completely different ending to the civil rights movement in the 1960's. Without greater leadership, a social movement could turn to chaos and there will not be anything lasting achieved.

Student 6: Can oppressors truly "convert" or realize their wrongdoings? On page 1, King states that "IN ANY nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action." Self-purification implies that an individual is capable of realizing their own biases or unjust actions and adjusting them. Do we truly see this behavior in the real world?

Student 7: Is this generally because the oppressor is truly malicious, or are they just resistant to change? MLK talks about this idea in relation to the attitudes of the "moderate whites" in the fight against segregation. Racially biased groups like the KKK are what immediately come to mind when you think about opposition of racial freedoms, but in reality it is the unmotivated majority of people too uninspired to join in the fight for change that inhibit progress the most. Even though moderate whites may not be openly campaigning for the benefits of segregation, deep down they are ultimately just content with the way things are. Oppressors come in various forms, but it feels like this group of people is simultaneously one of the most overlooked and smothering demographics.

Main point 3: There is a disconnect between the white church and its leadership with the oppressed in the outside world.

Student 8: What happens when there is this disconnect between the leader and followers in society? As a society, we see this all too frequently of leaders not actually understanding the life that the people they are "leading" live. I think most of society understands the power that comes with being a sacrificial leader; one who is actually willing to be open and do the things of their followers. What are some of the major consequences in the situations where leaders lead blindly?

Student 9: How does this disconnect translate into what people think of the church? In his letter, MLK acknowledges the disappointment he feels in his church because of how they have responded to the racism between Black and White people. He feels like he was let down and thought out of anyone they would have supported the movement for equality. How did these responses from religious leaders increase the segregation between Black and White people?

Student 10: How did any white members of the church not realize what they were doing was morally wrong? A "follow the leader" mentality may have taken hold on the society causing this to happen. Even if they knew what they were doing was wrong, they may not have wanted to be the first to step out and say something. This is difficult to do for any cause, let alone such a serious one.

Student 11: Why are these leaders so reluctant to speak out against this issue and take the proper steps to address it? These leaders have so much power at their disposal--enough power to impact the masses. Yet, they are unwilling to use that power to change society for the better. Is it that the these leaders' priorities do not lie with helping those who are oppressed, or that they are worried about what might be risked if they do address these issues?

Here I include an example of a main point and posted questions regarding Gang Leader for a Day*, chapter 8, which as I mentioned above, I was nervous about including in this course:*

Main point 1: Gentrification creates large problems for those in the projects.

Student 1 question: How do we counteract gentrification to promote affordable housing for lower-income homes? When homes are torn down, it is clear, as noted in the book, the only interests at play are those invested in real estate. In Chicago specifically, the Daley administration was even involved, as the tearing down of Robert Taylor was a huge land grab and it benefitted those who were already

wealthy (268). I feel like we have talked about this a lot in class, but how do we counteract this greed? What is it going to take for people to believe more in the common good than their own self-interest?

Student 2 question: How can the people within Robert Taylor survive when it's broken down? Due to this immense threat of their home being torn down, everyone is struggling to figure out what happens next. Most of these people have lived in the projects their whole lives. This means that they have never dealt with traditional ways of renting a home. For example, working with a landlord or a company. How will they be able to survive if they've only been taught the skills of how to survive in the projects?

Student 3: Is there a way to start fixing the issues within the projects while not just tearing the structures down? Tearing down the residential structures is not the solution; in fact, it just creates a shortage of housing and results in larger issues. I can understand that some buildings might be too far gone at this point to allow them to stay standing, but what is a solution besides leaving these people homeless?

Acknowledgements

The research grounding this reflective essay has approval from the university's human subjects and institutional review board.

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