

**Transcending the Medium:
Creating Cohesive & Caring Communities of Learners via Zoom**

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Abstract: A student-centered and dialogue-based pedagogical style is suitable not only for the in-person university classroom but also highly adaptable to the synchronous online learning environment. The core dialogue values and practices of *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness* can establish a safe container for meaningful synchronous classroom dialogues around central course subject matters. Cohesive, caring, and supportive synchronous online human learning communities are achievable by and for today's students, and course evaluation data consistent with this claim are offered along with the professor's subjective perceptions.

Introduction

When the Covid pandemic first hit the Hawaiian Islands in the spring of 2020, I contacted my Dean on the UH-Hilo campus and let him know I would like to be among the very last faculty members to be required to leave the physical classroom and join the online world of teaching. I believed that the student-centered and dialogue-based courses that I had been facilitating for decades (interpersonal communication, leadership, seminar in human dialogue, seminar in listening, and communication and love) absolutely needed to be conducted face-to-face on our UH-Hilo campus. It seemed at that time that any alternative delivery modality would be fated to major failure. But now, after five completed semesters of synchronous online teaching (fifteen classes), it is apparent that I was wrong. I have discovered that the kinds of student-centered and highly interactive dialogue-based courses that I teach have not only successfully “survived” our synchronous Zoom sessions, they have “thrived.”

Transcending the Medium

Situated within the physical classroom for decades, each of my classes (capped at twenty-five students then and now) would first have to move their desk-chairs into a circular arrangement (i.e., as closely as we could approximate a “circle” within a confining rectangular room). This was done so that everyone would ideally have direct visual access to everyone else, though that was rarely actually achieved. Now, in our online expanded “invisible” circle, we are in fact able to have everyone seeing everyone (with no dark screens allowed except by special arrangement).

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As class facilitator I can now see the entire class more efficiently than ever before, and gain a quick sense of the “whole.” I can quickly access useful nonverbal data that would have been more far more elusive in a physical classroom, and this is a benefit of our synchronous connection.

My own pedagogical format has never been monological (lecture-driven) but always student-centered (Rogers, 1961, Ch. 13-15) and based around the human dialogue process (Isaacs, 1999; Bohm, 1997). Students are responsible for completing assigned chapter readings from our course texts in preparation for each weekly two hour and forty-five minutes class session. Then and now, students are asked in class to share their favorite sections from a given chapter, those sentences or paragraphs that have the most meaning for them personally. We enter whatever doors the students open, and publicly reflect upon certain of the ideas or notions or concepts that emerge. Students begin to inter-relate themes from the chapter at hand, along with relevant experiences from their own lives. The aim is to *inquire together*, to *think together*, to pursue *shared inquiry* into themes from our central subject matter, to tease-out these themes, to explore and creatively reflect upon them, and to wonder about it all out aloud and together. We communicate with one another in conversational give-and-take, and our central topics evolve as we continue discoursing around them. Outgoing students voluntarily step in, and as the session progresses quieter students are gently invited forth by name, asking them what has been occurring to them as they’ve been listening that they could share. The aim is to supportively draw-out everyone into the public sphere, no one remaining permanently “on the bench.” Students find voice, and an active learning community takes shape.

The core elements of a dialogue-based approach as valued, taught, and enacted in my own dialogue-centered courses are these: (1) *Warmth*, (2) *Empathy*, (3) *Genuineness*, (4) *Vulnerability*, (5) *Imagination & Improvisation*, (6) *Being Present-Centered*, (7) *Equality of Participation*, and (8) *Suspending*. These are summarized by the acronym *WEG-VIBES* (Gordon, 2020). The first three of these elements are taken from the “person-centered approach” of the late Dr. Carl Rogers (1989; 1980; 1961), one of the founding prime-movers of student-centered teaching.

Warmth has to do with clearly communicating that we *care about*, *accept*, *respect*, and even *prize* our students, communicating that they are valuable and precious to us. *Empathy* entails our being able to put ourselves within our students’ frames of reference at *both* cognitive and affective levels, and have them *feel* our deep understanding. *Genuineness* involves our being open, honest, and sincere; not erecting an aloof facade and playing the role of distanced “expert,” but being accessible and “authentic” as a palpably real human being. These three elements of *Warmth*, *Empathy*, and *Genuineness* are foundational and at the heart of creating the larger invisible “container” in which healthy human dialogue can be born, can grow, and flourish. They are modeled for the students and also held as worthy aims to which students themselves are invited to aspire.

Also important is what we do *within* our dialogue “container.” *Vulnerability* means that we are increasingly willing to take some risks, to lay down some of our armor, to participate, to allow

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our common humanity to be felt. *Imagination & Improvisation* call for us to be willing to step outside “the box,” our habitual comfort zone, and to at moments dare to publicly speak spontaneously, creatively, generatively. *Being Present-Centered* involves being undistracted, fully-focused upon this immediate moment and these people here and now. *Equality of Participation* means that no one person or sub-group should dominate the floor, including the teacher, and space needs to be made for everyone. *Suspending* involves “relaxing our grip” on our reactive judgments, our opinions and positions, and holding them more “lightly” within our awareness. Rather than quickly and vigorously *Defending* our positions, for the time being we practice *Suspending* them. *Suspending* is a learned skill (Gordon, 2023), and dialogue provides ongoing opportunities for its development.

The dialogue facilitator attempts to embody these *WEG-VIBES* attitudes and behaviors as best s/he is able in a given session in order to help establish a constructive learning climate. The facilitator serves as a role model for group members, a friendly, caring, and sincere presence. And students too are actively encouraged to become self-aware and skilled at using the *WEG-VIBES* practices as best they can at each class session for the greater good of the whole. As Porges (2017) documents, we humans would like to be able to relax our self-protective barriers but will only do so when we sense *Safety* within the environments in which we find ourselves. The generation of *Warmth, Empathy, and Genuineness* contribute to inducing felt *Safety*, whether in a live classroom setting or a synchronous Zoom environment. The teacher who chooses to pursue a dialogue-based pedagogical model will need to project *Safety* from the inception of the class and within each session, and inspire this in others.

Students need to sense that the teacher cares about them, accepts them, values them, respects them, understands them, and is being an authentic fellow human being with them. In short, the teacher establishes an overall *Caring Presence*. I welcome each student individually by first name as they join a given session, and engage in phatic communion (“small talk”) with each, ties of union created by the mutual exchange of positive sentiments. Smiles and laughter are shared early in the session, and an upbeat mood of lightheartedness and camaraderie is established. Again, I continually draw quieter students forward by name as a session progresses, and affirmatively respond to their insights and wisdom. Within the felt *Safety* of this quality of class climate, student experimenting and risk-taking at cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels can be further encouraged and reinforced.

One of my favorite Hawaiian terms is *kukulu kumuhana*, which refers to the pooling and unification of *mana* energies (personal powers) within a group for shared positive purpose. For a group or class to ascend to becoming a cohesive “team” united in focus and aim, for *kukulu kumuhana* to be awakened, enactment of the *WEG-VIBES* practices by teacher (facilitator) and students is key. Here is an in-class statement made by a student at the concluding session of a recent course: “*Love radiates the Zoom room!*” A reasonable translation would be that our *Warmth, Empathy, and Genuineness* worked effectively in shaping a *Safe* space where students could let down their guard and be themselves, feel accepted and understood, pool their *mana*, and be part of a caring and cohesive learning community. This can happen even on small glass and plastic screens, people separated from one another across islands, state lines, and countries. The climate we establish is not contingent upon proximity in physical space, but proximity in

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emotional space. We can share intimate connection regardless of the constraints of a given electronic medium as long as an architecture of *Safety* has been constructed together by each and all, beginning with the facilitator and spreading throughout the learning community.

Outcome Data

I have now completed teaching fifteen synchronous online courses since the start of the pandemic period: nine of these fifteen courses (60%) have resulted in perfect global *Course* mean scores of 5.0 (and across the six remaining classes a mean range of 4.69 to 4.92). Nine of fifteen courses (60%) also received perfect global *Instructor* mean scores of 5.0. (with a mean range of 4.69 to 4.94 for the other six classes). It might be added that the response-rates for the above student evaluations ranged from a semesterly mean average of 50% to 86% of students participating, and a grand mean response-rate across all five semesters of 64%. These response-rates are higher than the norm for UH-Hilo course evaluation response-rates, and far higher than annual UH-Hilo faculty response-rates for evaluating administrators.

On the other hand, my nine on-campus courses in the three semesters immediately prior to synchronous online delivery (the only semesters to which we have historical access at our online UH Evaluation System) yielded not a single mean score (i.e., 0%) at the perfect 5.0 level for either global *Course* or *Instructor* evaluations across nine classes. Using Fisher exact probability tests these pre-to-post differences for both global *Course* and *Instructor* scores are both statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. Students appear highly satisfied with what was achieved via their student-centered and dialogue-based synchronous online learning communities.

I cannot generalize from these data to asynchronous course delivery, nor to classes larger than 25 students, for these fall outside my realm of online teaching experience.

Conclusion

While I have vacated the three-dimensional physical classroom space and transitioned my classes to the small screen synchronous online medium, in these student-centered and dialogue-based classes we have sacrificed neither subject matter engagement, rich human dialogue, nor a strong sense of cohesive interpersonal connection. I sense no fall-off in student engagement and class cohesiveness, nor do the quantitative data summarized above suggest this, nor their accompanying qualitative student comments. What has enabled class engagement and cohesion to be sustained? In my classes we have been sustained by the values and practices that underpin high-quality human dialogue in general, namely *Warmth, Empathy, Genuineness, Vulnerability, Imagination & Improvisation, Being Present-Centered, Equality, and Suspending*. These values and practices are indeed translatable to the small-screen synchronous format, and their breadth and depth permit a powerful transcendence of the often-assumed limitations of this medium of learner engagement.

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