



# Yes, Teaching and Pedagogical Practices Matter: Graduate Students' of Color Stories in Hybrid Higher Education/ Student Affairs (HESA) Graduate Programs

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## Abstract

Faculty members must employ pedagogical practices that foster humanizing learning environments for graduate Students of Color who have been marginalized and othered in higher education. Methodologically using narrative inquiry, this paper describes graduate Students' of Color stories in higher education/student affairs hybrid graduate preparation programs to understand how faculty contribute to humanizing and critical pedagogy. The findings highlight three central pedagogical strategies faculty used in hybrid classrooms that graduate Students' of Color named as most effective: (1) taught to transgress against racism and oppression, (2) emphasized dialogic pedagogy strategies, and (3) encouraged collaboration inside and outside of the classroom. This study highlights critical pedagogies for student engagement and is a call-to-action for higher education to center humanizing praxis in hybrid learning environments and beyond.

**Keywords** Graduate Students of Color · Hybrid classrooms · Faculty · Critical pedagogy · Higher education and student affairs

## Introduction

Colleges and universities in the United States have long been affected by and perpetuate white supremacy through policy, practice, and curriculum and pedagogy (McKenzie, 2020). Amid continued racial injustice on college campuses across

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the country and in surrounding areas, Students of Color have made clear the necessary institutional changes that must occur (Author, 2020), both inside and outside of academic spaces. As such, higher education and student affairs professionals are frequently on the front lines of supporting students as they navigate our changing society. While most higher education/student affairs (HESA) programs declare a commitment to inclusion, equity, diversity, and social justice in their recruitment materials (ACPA/NASPA, 2015), effective training in these areas does not always translate to classroom content and pedagogy (Haynes, 2016). By critical pedagogy, we use Freire's (1970) and Giroux's (1991) definitions. Critical pedagogy should encourage critical consciousness-building, while critiquing structures of power and oppression.

Teaching and pedagogical practices have not only had to shift to decenter whiteness and hierarchical learning, but classroom dynamics that once were primarily formatted using in-person and/or face-to-face designs have been altered to online and/or hybrid settings before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lederman, 2020). Online learning can be impersonal, making it even more difficult to create and sustain the relationships necessary to engage in conversation that explores, addresses, and unpacks structural and systemic oppression. It can also leave out exploration and understanding of the local context where the college or university operates.

For graduate Students of Color in particular, who are often marginalized, isolated, and othered within higher education environments, humanizing and critical pedagogies in online learning spaces encourage a sense of belonging and critical consciousness-building (Harris & Linder, 2018; Linder et al., 2015). Therefore, this study specifically sought to add to existing literature on graduate Students' of Color experiences within higher education (Tuit, 2003, 2009), by shedding light on how faculty within hybrid HESA graduate preparation programs have enacted critical and humanizing pedagogical practices. Thus, the research question that guided this study was: What are the pedagogical practices used by faculty in hybrid HESA preparation programs that build student engagement and critical consciousness as shared by the stories of graduate Students of Color?

## Relevant Literature

A detailed overview of related literature is used to understand graduate Students' of Color stories about hybrid HESA graduate program faculty's pedagogical practices. First, we describe the challenges that graduate Students of Color experience. Then, we discuss pedagogical practices often used in higher education. Last, we highlight hybrid environments, particularly noting the need to humanize these learning spaces.

## Challenges Experienced by Graduate Students of Color

Several studies have unpacked the challenges that graduate Students of Color face in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), including that PWIs are unwelcoming and

racially discriminatory (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). For example, graduate Students of Color have had to alter what they say in class out of fear that white instructors may misinterpret their words (Tuitt, 2009). Additionally, graduate Students of Color have pointed to negative experiences with white professors who fail to intervene when there are racial microaggressions (Linder et al., 2015). White professors often ask Students of Color to take on the emotional burden of diversity-related labor, such as being asked to speak on behalf of their identities (e.g., race) in class, serving on task forces, and appearing in recruitment materials without compensation for their time, energy, or likeness (Kelly & Gayles, 2010).

When it comes to white peers, many graduate Students of Color also face the brunt of harm when white students deflect conversations about race and racism (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Sue et al., 2009). Graduate Students of Color may share their thoughts and opinions only to be gaslit, or have their experiences undermined, by white peers or professors (Tuitt, 2009). Further, graduate Students of Color feel isolated in their programs, as research shows they are often one of only a few Students of Color in their HESA programs (Harris & Linder, 2018). Therefore, pedagogical practices that refute dominant norms of learning and make them feel valued in the classroom are critical.

### Teaching and Pedagogical Practices in Higher Education

While many conversations in higher education focus on diversifying curriculum as central to creating inclusive environments for Students of Color (Kelly & Gayles, 2010), diversifying curriculum is only just the first step. In light of the body of literature that uplifts both the importance of and strategies to enact critical pedagogies (hooks, 1994; Giroux, 1991), we situate our study in the recognition that it is not just about *what* we teach, but *how* we teach it. Literature has shown that higher education faculty often still use traditional modes of instruction that are informed by a Western approach to education, such as lecturing, even when the curriculum brings in diverse perspectives (Tuitt, 2003). Over the past few decades, however, more scholarship has come out to support faculty members' understandings of the benefits of instructional practices that are more student-centered than teacher-centered (Lindholm et al., 2005). For example, Cabrera et al. (2002) highlighted how collaborative learning was an engaging strategy that institutions can use to expand student development. The results of their study showed that Students of Color and women were more likely to engage in collaborative learning than their white peers (Cabrera et al., 2002).

Building on the importance of collaborative teaching as a tool to evolve critical consciousness, literature specifies that professors should engage students in the teaching and learning process by collectively unearthing inequities, encouraging critical thinking, and instilling the mindset that the process of critical consciousness is on-going (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011). In sum, while higher education faculty have often employed teacher-centered pedagogies, research highlights the transformative nature of pedagogy when it places students at the center.

## Humanizing Hybrid Environments

The hybrid learning environment, also known as blended instruction, deserves further exploration in conversations about humanizing pedagogy. Hybrid learning involves multiple considerations, such as layered levels of instruction, a combination of learning styles, and unique student populations that often enroll in hybrid programs (Yudko et al., 2008). Due to the technological aspects of hybrid environments that can be impersonal, scholars must consider how to humanize these learning spaces, especially for graduate Students of Color.

While humanizing pedagogy is often not described within hybrid environments, there are several ways that faculty can transform classroom spaces through humanizing pedagogy. This pedagogy moves beyond the banking model of education, which is rooted in “settler-colonial and neoliberal hierarchies” (Dalmage & Martinez, 2020, p. 124). The banking model privileges the knowledge of the professor, while humanizing pedagogy acknowledges and centers students’ realities and experiences (Freire, 1970). By centering students’ lived experiences, it could personalize classroom topics and make topics more relevant (Stewart et al., 2020). Specifically, “by tapping into students’ lived experiences, we invite (and model for) our students to unite their personal, political, emotional, and intellectual selves and engage in learning from multiple vantage points” (Tuitt et al., 2018, p. 67).

Faculty must be flexible in honoring the diversity of students’ backgrounds and experiences when engaging in humanizing practices in hybrid programs, especially the online elements (Alcala et al., 2016). A few examples of how this can be done include reflective and integrative learning, collaborative learning, and encouraging dialogue (Tuitt, 2016). These pedagogical strategies can help students activate critical consciousness and meaningfully engage in the learning process (Tuitt et al., 2018). They can also provide space for graduate Students of Color to share their stories, experiences, and feelings. As Zembylas (2021) discussed, affective solidarity challenges white students to not only learn stories and content, but to *feel* differently. Storytelling can evoke emotional connections in higher education teaching and learning, which can contribute to greater solidarity (Ribeiro, 2017).

Faculty can also create affirming spaces by modeling vulnerability as part of their pedagogy. In general, graduate Students of Color prefer professors who show up to classrooms as their authentic selves and genuinely share personal narratives that connect with students (Tuitt, 2008). Faculty members can bring their whole selves into the learning environment and resist the traditional Eurocentric ideas that promote hierarchies in classroom settings (Tuitt et al., 2018), especially in hybrid settings.

## Classrooms as Political Spaces

Classrooms are highly political spaces that encompass differing views about social issues and politics (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008; Giroux & Giroux, 2006). However, faculty’s ability to navigate politics in the classroom is influenced by the complex and personal nature of social justice (hooks, 1994; Pérez, 2019). They may feel that

sharing about current events and social justice topics through their pedagogy might impact how students view them, but silence also communicates a value system. When faculty fail to reckon with how white supremacy impacts classroom conversations and pedagogy, it upholds coloniality and injustice (Freire, 1970; Zembylas, 2021).

Literature has described how some faculty are ill-prepared to address instances of racism and oppression (Pérez, 2019; Quaye, 2012). When examining faculty willingness to intervene in conversations related to racism and oppression, scholarship highlights variation between how Faculty of Color and white faculty address these instances (Pérez, 2019; Quaye, 2012). Faculty of Color may hesitate to include discourse about racism within the classroom out of fear they may receive negative teaching evaluations for addressing racial injustice. In other cases, Black faculty may connect current events on racism to classroom content and center these conversations regardless of class content, but need to be connected to additional support systems to navigate the emotional toll (McGowan et al., 2021). Whereas white faculty members often lack racial consciousness and can consciously and unconsciously ignore their privilege, their behavior can influence course design and instruction (Haynes, 2017). Unfortunately, white faculty that do not confront these ideologies neglect Students' of Color needs and minimize racism, perpetuating white innocence (Galman et al., 2010). When faculty members do not intervene, graduate Students of Color feel unseen and unheard.

Graduate Students of Color have called for institutional changes, including revisions at PWIs to center social justice appropriately in the curriculum, increase programs' dedication to racial justice, and include diversity and inclusion training for faculty (Kelley, 2016; Tuitt et al., 2018). Our work seeks to acknowledge how teaching and pedagogical approaches for HESA hybrid programs must be expansive, creating more socially just practices in learning spaces (hooks, 1994).

## Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Meyers's (2008) transformative pedagogy framework and bell hooks's (1994) teaching to transgress. Transformative pedagogy combines constructivist and critical pedagogy that encourages students to examine their beliefs, discuss current events and pose real-life problems, and understand how societal structures impact individuals (Meyers, 2008). Transformative pedagogy was theorized for online learning in higher education, so it enabled us a foundation to understand best practices in creating engaging and critical virtual classroom spaces, particularly in HESA hybrid graduate programs. For the sake of this study, we used three of the suggestions that Meyers (2008) posed as part of the transformative pedagogy framework, which included (1) creating a safe and inviting online environment through small group discussion, (2) collaboration inside and outside of the classroom between students, and (3) encouraging student participation and engagement. Meyers's (2008) examples of strategies for engagement framed our conceptual definition of student engagement.

In addition, we coupled this framework with bell hooks' (1994) teaching to transgress pedagogy. hooks described this as being grounded in anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogy that begins with dialogue as a means of crossing the boundaries and barriers of identity (hooks, 1994). Teaching students to *transgress* against race, gender, and class oppression, according to hooks (1994), is the most important goal of teaching. Teaching and learning becomes a collaborative process of sharing through the process of dialogue (Shor & Freire, 1987).

hooks (1994) roots this work in concepts from Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, including the importance of dialogic pedagogy. Dialogic pedagogy recognizes and honors that students have knowledge and expertise to offer the classroom and the world. For graduate Students of Color, this pedagogical approach references their experience and knowledge as central to course content. In sum, transformative pedagogy and dialogic pedagogy provided a conceptual definition of student engagement, allowed us to analyze the data through the lens of critical and humanizing pedagogical practices, and equipped the infrastructure for focusing the study on hybrid HESA graduate programs.

## Methodology

We used narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005, 2011) to understand faculty's teaching and pedagogical practices in hybrid higher education/student affairs (HESA) graduate programs from graduate Students' of Color perspectives. Narrative inquiry describes "a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (Chase, 2005, p. 656). Throughout this study, we used narrative inquiry to tell collective stories of graduate Students of Color in hybrid HESA programs. The method aims to uncover stories that have historically been excluded within the literature. Narrative inquiry allows for a rich description of stories and experiences and encourages narrators to make meaning of these experiences in ways that storytelling alone does not. Rather, it is a "method of inquiry that uses storytelling to uncover nuance" (Wang & Geale, 2015, p. 198). It involves a dynamic relationship between the narrator and the researcher, where the narrator continues to reflect on their stories to make larger connections related to their own temporality, sociality, and spatiality in relationship to a particular phenomenon. In this case, narrators were encouraged to reflect on how the process of being a hybrid HESA student, their relationships to peers, faculty, and to the curriculum and pedagogy in their classes, as well as their relationship to the hybrid HESA learning environment.

## Sampling and Data Collection

To recruit participants, the second author identified hybrid HESA graduate programs in the United States using publicly available information from the Association of

College Personnel Administrators (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). We sent out email invitations and flyers to program coordinators who oversaw hybrid HESA graduate programs to share with individuals who self-identified as Black, African American, Latinx, Asian American, and Native American/Indigenous. Before engaging in data collection, we received IRB approval to conduct the study. We collected demographic data and conducted two 45–60 min semi-structured interviews with 17 self-identified graduate Students of Color who were enrolled or recently completed a hybrid HESA program (See Table 1). Eight hybrid HESA graduate programs are represented from the midwestern, northeastern, and southern regions of the United States, comprising of institutions located in urban areas. The second author conducted all interviews to ensure continuity, and asked specific questions about students' overall impressions of their experience as a hybrid student in their HESA graduate program and their feelings about the pedagogical strategies they felt were most effective. They were also asked follow-up questions to make meaning of their experiences in relation to place, relationship, and process. All audio recordings and documents were de-identified, including the removal of institutions to protect narrators' identities.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis process in narrative research is not restricted to set guidelines on how to identify and investigate stories (Chase, 2011). Therefore, we began the data analysis process by revisiting participants' memos from data collection. Memoing helped us to understand what we heard in the interviews and to reflect on new ways to understand the data (Groenewald, 2008). Next, we used the questions from our interview protocol and Meyers's (2008) transformative pedagogy framework and hooks's (1994) teaching to transgress to develop a provisional coding list. During this process we relied heavily on our understanding of the literature to inform our understanding of the participants' narratives and how they made meaning of their stories (Chase, 2005, 2011). Once we engaged in the initial coding using the provisional coding list, we used open and axial coding to ensure that we understood the stories. During this process, we also solidified salient themes (Saldaña, 2021). We used codes such as *overall impressions*, *online classes*, *in-person classes*, *racism*, *dialogic pedagogy*, and *collaboration*. To ensure trustworthiness of the findings, we implemented several strategies throughout every aspect of the research process, such as intercoder reliability, peer debriefing, and memoing. We also interviewed a number of students to grapple with one of the limitations of narrative inquiry — the method relies heavily on memory of the subject, which may influence what they share and don't share. Despite this, a narrative inquiry research approach was the most applicable methodology for our study because narrative inquiry emphasizes dialogue and centering participants' narratives, aligned with our theoretical framework and research question (Chase, 2005).

**Table 1** Participant demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Pronouns	Race/Ethnicity	Status in Program	Institution type
Cameron	(he, him, his)	Black/African American	Second year	Public university
Camille	(she, her, hers)	African American	Graduated	Private liberal arts college
Coffee	(they, them, theirs)	Malayali/Asian American	Graduated	Private Catholic university
Corbin	(he, him, his)	Native American	Second year	Public university
Danielle	(she, her, hers)	Black	Second year	Public university
Jake	(he, him, his)	Hispanic/Mexican American	Second year	Private liberal arts college
Jasmine	(she, her, hers)	African American	Graduated	Public university
Lawrence	(he, him, his)	Black/African American	Graduated	Public university
Kaya	(she, her, hers)	Black/African American	First year	Public university
Kim	(she, her, hers)	Black/African American	First year	Public university
Lee	(he, him, his)	Biracial (Mexican and White)	Second year	Public university
Matthew	(he, him, his)	Hispanic/Mexican American	First year	Public university
Melissa	(she, her, hers)	Mexican American	Second year	Public university
Nicole	(she, her, hers)	Black/African American	First year	Public university
Red	(she, her, hers)	Asian American	First year	Public university
Tyler	(he, him, his)	African American	Second year	Public university
Xavier	(he, him, his)	Black American	Graduated	Public university



## Researchers' Positionality

As a part of the research process, we examined our own positioning in the process, which connects to the use of dialogue and reflection within narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005, 2011). Our research team members included three cisgender Black women and one cisgender Black man who have participated in academia as both graduate students and faculty members. Two of the four researchers directly engaged with hybrid HESA graduate education. Specifically, the second author received her HESA master's degree from a hybrid program where she took classes with graduate Students of Color synchronously through Blackboard Collaborate, summer residencies that were face-to-face and asynchronous,<sup>1</sup> and traditional face-to-face courses. The third author oversaw a hybrid HESA Ed.D. program. For narrative inquiry in particular, this was helpful because the method requires that researchers are heavily embedded in a topic. In our case, this was hybrid HESA programs. We used this knowledge to inform our construction of the interview protocol used during the data collection process. We acknowledge our collective relation to the nuanced realities as all of us were once graduate Students of Color having to navigate complex learning spaces.

## Findings

Findings from the study yielded three major teaching and pedagogical practices that Students of Color found impactful in building their engagement and critical consciousness in hybrid HESA programs. Therefore, we present these central themes and provide interpretations of the themes using the narrators' voices with the theoretical underpinning of transformative pedagogy and teaching to transgress. Ultimately, graduate Students of Color described how faculty members within hybrid HESA courses: (1) taught to transgress against racism and oppression, (2) emphasized dialogic pedagogy strategies, and (3) encouraged collaboration inside and outside of the classroom.

## Teaching to Transgress Against Racism and Oppression

Narrators discussed how having professors that intentionally created space for conversations about social justice and current events helped them engage with the content and the program. This also encouraged them to share their experiences and opinions, or transgress, against racism and oppression. Some professors, as part of their pedagogy, supported narrators in challenging their white classmates to be more critical in both their class assignments and in their assistantships, instead of stifling what they shared in class.

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<sup>1</sup> Asynchronous learning does not meet live. It allows students to view content at a time they choose. Synchronous learning requires that students and a faculty member meet at a specific time each week. In our study, we use face-to-face to describe both synchronous sessions in person and online.

Many of the narrators noted that their white classmates often resisted talking about race and racism. For instance, Melissa, a Mexican American<sup>2</sup> a graduate student, detailed a difficult moment in her multicultural counseling class where the class was discussing privilege. Melissa noted,

I was telling them about incidents that have occurred in the classroom, and then the other students were just like, “Are you sure that’s happening?” or, “Are you sure you’re not blowing this out of proportion?” I’m getting frustrated because I don’t know... And then it’s hard when you’re not in person.

Melissa’s majority-white class gaslit her when she detailed an event that happened in the university community. Her quote illustrated how she chose to vocalize the harms of racism and was met with backlash, which was even more difficult to navigate in an online space. Her professor reassured her and then asked her to be a guest lecturer in a future class, which fueled her to continue to raise her classmate’s consciousness through critical dialogue. The professor not only stood up for Melissa, but encouraged her in her capacity to enact change within the classroom.

In other cases, professors provided campus resources and invited guest speakers to share additional resources on privilege, bias, and oppression as a means of helping graduate Students of Color transgress. Cameron, a Black graduate student, discussed how one professor invited a staff member from the human resources department at the university to talk about bias during the 2016 election. While the professor could have chosen not to address the election, the professor offered covert support for students. In Cameron’s opinion, this experience in class made him feel like he mattered. By bringing in a guest speaker on this topic, the faculty member’s pedagogy built critical consciousness as part of teaching to transgress, while it also expressed that the faculty member would not remain neutral in the situation.

Narrators felt isolated and disconnected from the class when faculty members disregarded critical conversations. For example, Lawrence, a Black graduate student, described an experience in class when his professor shut down students’ religious beliefs in a class on diversity. He thought the experience was jarring, especially because the class was focused on honoring diverse experiences. Without having professors that would intervene or welcome conversations about race, privilege, and oppression, Jake, a Mexican American graduate student, said, “I don’t think I would feel comfortable in this course or in this institution.” Participants emphasized the need for faculty members to create space for them to process and discuss their experiences.

Narrators also asserted how valuable it was that faculty used online platforms within hybrid HESA graduate programs to make materials more relevant to their day-to-day work. As a result, participants were able to learn from resources that were not in a textbook, but rather public scholarship. Lee, a biracial graduate student, shared that in their program,

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<sup>2</sup> In the descriptions of graduate students’ race, we use how they identified themselves in the interview.

All of the readings were article readings...we didn't have a textbook assigned even. That has been one nice thing about the program, is that we don't rely on published textbooks. It's a lot more readings from journals, so that's been really nice.

Being able to use the online platform as a resource to share materials like journal articles, news articles, and professional association blog posts gave students the flexibility to explore topics from multiple perspectives.

Other narrators detailed that having materials online made the work more accessible. Kaya, a Black student, shared, "I think it's been really helpful, in terms of accessibility, in terms of being able to go back and look at different assignments that are posted online, and go through different videos, and our readings." Having the materials located in one place through the learning technology site enabled her to be able to look back at the information and reflect on it. Narrators discussed the importance of receiving the information in multiple modalities (e.g., video, article) as tools for engagement and also for reflection during non-class time. Using multiple forms of content outside of the literature communicated to students that there are many forms of knowledge outside of textbooks, including personal narratives. This practice is in line with teaching to transgress against boundaries that may prohibit students from seeing their experiences reflected in the course content.

### **Emphasizing Dialogic Pedagogy Strategies in Face-to-Face and Virtual Classrooms**

Throughout the interviews, narrators named case scenarios, dialogue, and classroom discussion as helpful pedagogical tools to not only learn content, but engage with other students' experiences and perspectives. Particularly, class discussions enabled students to reflect on their graduate assistantships and the practical aspects of what they were learning in relation to their roles on campus. Overall, narrators preferred in-person sessions for discussions because they were able to be more present and have hands-on opportunities to be in conversation.

Students' ability to disengage from answering in an online format made online discussions more challenging for participants to feel like they were a part of a classroom community. Without the interactive component where Students of Color were able to discuss with one another and engage in dialogue, the virtual classes in the hybrid model could feel isolating. In some classes where students were not encouraged to collaborate or work together in group projects while online, having face-to-face classes as part of the hybrid model helped to fill the gaps where they felt disconnected from their virtual classes. Corbin, a Native American/Indigenous graduate student, shared the reasons why he found face-to-face classes to be an opportunity to build on the content they learned online,

It was good to have that face-to-face because one, you can ask questions on online discussion boards, but it's so much easier to do it in person when you can see the way they're explaining things. It's like..when there's a topic and someone who's very passionate about it, you can see that when they're explaining it versus something you read in text on a discussion site.

Narrators felt like they were able to have more authentic conversations because they were able to ask questions and clarify in real-time, as opposed to being able to edit their thoughts in online discussion boards. While discussion boards only shared students' written reflections, narrators felt more connected when they could experience others' non-verbal cues when they were sharing their viewpoints.

In an online class, narrators also shared that it was important for other students to have their cameras turned on to be able to interact with them. Lawrence talked about this when he stated that being able to see others, especially during group work, helped with accountability to see each other "eye-to-eye." This was particularly important when having dialogue about identity, social justice, and race. To illustrate, Kim, an African American graduate student, described an experience in class where they were discussing a theory. Kim shared with the group, "At all times I am African American, I'm a woman, I am a first generation student."

After she shared, she said she felt encouraged because of the affirmative feedback she received in the chat box and from seeing the positive reaction on others' faces. She described, "Just having other people understand where I was coming from... Having that component where we were able to give feedback on each other...that made me feel pretty awesome." Kim's point highlighted how when she shared parts of her identity with the group, it was important to be able to receive feedback in real-time.

Jake also underscored how vital it was to see others in his class during discussions,

I would say that I do prefer in-person class sessions, because I feel like I am present and it's more hands-on than I do online. I feel like online, people are more reluctant to share things they believe in and it doesn't allow quick responses. In class if someone said something and I had a question about it, I can easily get the answer there or figure out what they meant instead of online, because they can choose not to respond to that online.

Jake emphasized that in discussion boards, students could choose not to respond to one another. In moments where students, particularly white students, might feel uncomfortable talking about racism or social justice, they could choose to not engage if they were answering prompts on a discussion board. Live dialogue, rather than discussion board posts, allowed graduate Students of Color to share their experiences, thus humanizing the content and the learning process. Live dialogue could even happen in the chat box. Jasmine mentioned how instructors tried to make students feel involved in the learning process by asking for their opinions in the chat box so they had an opportunity to discuss the material with one another in real time. Jasmine mentioned how instructors tried to make students feel involved in the learning process by asking for their opinions in the chat box so they had an opportunity to discuss the material with one another in real time.

Dialogue also helped students feel like they could relate to the content more and that they could share how the literature related to their experiences. Being able to interact with other students to learn about what they were working on or what they were thinking provided more nuance on the material. This type of interaction was important for many of the participants because they felt like they were able to see

what the theory looked like in practice when their classmates would offer insight into their experiences with their graduate assistantships or full-time roles. Corbin described what this looked like in some of the courses he took,

What they would do is they would introduce the topic for the week, talk about some of the research behind it, and personal experiences which made it more relatable than what an article or PowerPoint says. Then it would turn into a discussion. We would be able to interact with each other. In a sense, we express our thoughts and opinions about the content that week.

For some narrators, this also enabled them to learn about functional areas or student populations that they had not worked with yet. In particular, Camille, an African American graduate student, mentioned how classroom discussion allowed her to see beyond the textbook's descriptions of student affairs work,

For my experience with the hybrid program, we did a lot of case scenarios and dialogue. During class discussions, a lot of my classmates talked about their experiences working in their particular position, how they work with certain students, how they apply certain things. We based [it] on different theories we learned in class so it was valuable for me because not only did I get the textbook perspective, but I got my classmates' and professors' as well.

Class dialogues enabled narrators to make connections between the theory and practical application, as well as connections between their different graduate assistantships and functional areas. Specifically, in hybrid settings when classes were virtual, participants emphasized the need for classroom dialogue, as they felt even further isolated without that level of interaction with their classmates.

### **Collaboration Inside and Outside of the Classroom**

Narrators felt most engaged in the content when hybrid classes were not just lectures, but incorporated opportunities for collaboration and connection amongst students. Some of these pedagogical strategies included virtual presentations and study groups outside of regularly scheduled class time. For example, Jasmine, an African American graduate student, mentioned how in one of her online classes, they “gave presentations online, did mini sessions in different chat rooms,” which she called, “participative.” The multiple ways of engagement in the online course, such as breakout rooms and presentations, made her feel connected, even in the virtual session. Kim also appreciated being able to use different forms of collaboration on Blackboard,

It's not just people on the other side or I'm just submitting a paper to the abyss somewhere. We actually are all talking together and doing group projects.

Collaboration allowed narrators and their classmates to inquire about various experiences, engage in critical dialogue, and feel connected despite communicating virtually.

Students also provided one another feedback that led to critical conversations about how to not only discuss racism and injustice, but apply their learning to their work. In Kaya's class on college students' experiences in the United States, students each facilitated the class to discuss the experiences of different populations on campus. This feedback helped them ensure that they were not only providing information about each population, but also resources to deepen their knowledge and extend their practice. The collaboration and feedback sessions encouraged students to challenge one another to not only think more critically, but move from dialogue to action.

Graduate Students of Color in the study felt collaboration and working together not just on course content, but to provide support and camaraderie, was something that was an integral part of their overall program experience. In online settings, partnership and team-based projects helped them to make connections that transcended beyond the classroom. Kim noted how transformative it was to connect with other graduate Students of Color, particularly African American women in her program,

I did get to meet the only other African American woman and we were able to talk, relate, and get each other's phone numbers. Now when we have questions we call each other. I love that the program has a component where we can all get together and we also have collaborative sessions. We talk about the curriculum, what we're reading, what we're doing. It's very personable and very hands-on for an online program, or at least a lot more than I thought it would be.

Kim's quote highlighted the importance of community for graduate Students of Color, particularly as they navigated predominantly white institutions that they sought to transgress.

While some collaborations were created as a result of faculty members' assigning group projects, others happened more organically. Some students, who felt like they were not getting the necessary support that they needed from faculty members, turned to their peers to answer some of their questions about the assignments and content. Narrators highlighted their frustrations when faculty members did not employ pedagogical strategies that centered collaboration. For example, Danielle and her classmates mostly used Facebook groups to stay in contact, ask questions, and share resources in between their online meetings. Danielle discussed how if it were not for her classmates and their online collaboration meetings, she "probably would've dropped out" because the professor didn't give clear instructions or opportunities to engage with her classmates.

Ultimately, graduate Students of Color valued the opportunity to engage thoughtfully during their hybrid classes and noted how significant it was for professors to provide avenues for them to collaborate inside and outside of the classroom. It was crucial for the participants to not only be encouraged to work together as part of group projects, but create their own spaces to build community outside of class. This provided a network of support for Students of Color.

## Discussion and Implications

As many universities and colleges shift to online or hybrid learning, the findings provide promising pedagogical strategies to understand how to build humanizing and engaging hybrid programs for graduate Students of Color. The study provides tangible examples from graduate Students' of Color experiences that faculty can employ.

### Graduate Students' of Color Perspectives on Engaging Pedagogy

Narrators in the study named dialogic pedagogy and collaborative pedagogy as pedagogies that were most engaging, and also named that these pedagogies made them feel like they mattered in their HESA hybrid graduate programs. While previous scholarship has shown that teacher-centered pedagogy is most often used in higher education (Tuit, 2003), this study showed how faculty members *are* employing student-centered pedagogies in some cases. Our current study also showed how in other cases, there is still room for growth in areas where higher education faculty lack the necessary training and confidence to employ critical pedagogies. In the findings, narrators named instances where faculty members did not create space for conversation that uplifted multiple identities, which is aligned with scholarship by Perez (2019) and Quaye (2012).

To ensure effective HESA hybrid graduate programs for graduate Students' of Color, faculty should encourage students to collaborate not only during class time, but during out of class time as well. For graduate Students of Color in particular, who often feel isolated (Harris & Linder, 2018), formal and informal collaboration groups were positive experiences for many of the participants in the study. This is aligned with Cabrera et al.'s (2002) findings that Students of Color, find collaborative opportunities in class to be transformative. Particularly, collaboration refutes Western values of competition and leans into the values of collectivism and building solidarity, thus further disrupting educational hierarchies.

While some of those students' relationships were built organically, faculty members can play a role in facilitating meaningful relationships amongst cohort members. Faculty members can encourage collaboration, especially in a virtual format, by assigning group presentations on class topics, placing students in breakout rooms, and having feedback sessions, where students can share both feedback and resources. These pedagogical strategies both support and extend Meyers's (2008) transformative pedagogy framework.

Narrators also emphasized the importance of dialogic pedagogy in both in-person/face-to-face and online classes. They felt that the content resonated more deeply and it increased their understanding when they could learn from other students and share their own opinions. This speaks to previous research, which has shown that including students' lived experiences to personalize the content is critical (Stewart, et al., 2020). For graduate Students' of Color, this is even more important because Students of Color report they often feel tokenized in the curriculum (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002). By inviting student voices to offer reflections on the

content, faculty members can provide space for students to offer nuances and complexities about the content, as Students of Color are not a monolith. In providing that space, faculty members must be careful to not make Students of Color feel as though they are “diversity experts,” but rather experts of their own experiences (Kelly & Gayles, 2010, p. 81). Naming their experiences, such as in Kim’s case, was a powerful and affirming experience. On the other hand, we recognize that Students of Color should not be made to relive traumatic experiences for the sake of learning.

### **Transformative Pedagogy and Teaching to Transgress in the HESA Hybrid Classroom**

While much of the research that discusses faculty pedagogy has shown that faculty lack the necessary competence and training to employ critical pedagogies, this study offers more hopeful findings. Narrators underscored how valuable it was to have professors that not only thoughtfully navigated social justice conversations in the classroom, but provided additional resources and support for students to transgress. Narrators said that faculty can support them by bringing in guest speakers and encouraging them inside and outside of class to share their perspectives. This transgression looked like pushing back against majority-white classmates who either shied away from talking about race or made racist remarks about Students’ of Color experiences. We also navigate the tensions associated with the process of transgression and interrogate how faculty must not only encourage Students of Color to transgress, but also work to dismantle the oppressive systems that require Students of Color to transgress.

While students, namely white students, entering programs may not come with an orientation to social justice and respond to race-related conversations by deflecting or gaslighting Students of Color (Sue et al., 2009), faculty members also play a central role in encouraging white students to serve as allies and co-conspirators to movements for racial justice. For example, Zembylas (2021) noted the importance of mobilizing affective solidarity with the affective worlds of marginalized students. Additionally, McGowan et al. (2021) noted the importance of holding white students accountable for harmful rhetoric, while creating space for students to process and think critically about their words and actions. As the narrators in the study mentioned, dialogic pedagogy created space for them to share their experiences and their feelings, as well as challenge their white peers to reckon with injustice.

When faculty members fail to engage in critical dialogue about current events that impact students, their silence communicates compliance with oppressive structures and systems (Freire, 1970). Education cannot be neutral because it always guides students towards a particular view of the world, thus not addressing harm communicates conformity to the oppressive structures we should seek to disrupt in critical and humanizing pedagogies (Giroux, 2010). What happens in society and in communities surrounding college and university campuses should not be left out of classroom conversations, whether in-person or online. Particularly, when Students of Color name and grapple with current events at universities and the surrounding communities, these conversations should not be shied away from in the classroom



because they influence, shape, and impact Students' of Color experiences. When faculty are silent about these events, they communicate a disregard for social justice broadly, but also social justice in the contexts they work and teach in.

This study also extended teaching to transgress (hooks, 1994) to include using more accessible materials for Students' of Color to transgress against racial and class boundaries. Particularly, participants noted how important it was that the readings were not from a textbook, which often presents a whitewashed worldview, but rather from journal articles, book chapters, videos and other forms of public scholarship. Having other forms of information also dismantles the hierarchy of what is considered worthy of academic exploration and what is not. In these other forms of scholarship, graduate Students of Color saw their experiences reflected, or could see the topic they were covering in class from a different viewpoint that allowed them to extend their thinking and practice. While textbooks are often cost-prohibitive, having the materials accessible in online formats allows students to have exposure to a wide variety of information.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

As faculty grapple with questions about what collaboration looks like in hybrid settings and how online platforms support and supplement learning, our findings illuminate strategies that graduate Students of Color felt were engaging. Our contribution to both scholarship and practice extends current research in three ways: (1) through centering graduate Students' of Color perspectives about what pedagogy best engages and supports them in HESA hybrid programs, (2) by adding to the corpus of data that directly supports Meyer's (2008) transformative pedagogy and hooks' (1994) teaching to transgress by highlighting the importance of dialogue and collaboration, and (3) supplementing the research that explores humanizing pedagogy in online spaces.

In practice, this study provides tangible strategies that faculty can include, directly from graduate Students' of Color perspectives. Faculty can use strategies such as: incorporating dialogue that challenges racism and oppression, providing resources, encouraging collaboration amongst students, addressing harm rather than shying away from difficult conversations, and asking students to lead dialogue.

This study also underscores that faculty play a crucial role in building on students' critical consciousness and ensuring humanizing spaces both online and in-person. As such, we encourage faculty to grapple with these questions: How are we creating humanizing spaces within institutions that have historically been, and continue to be, dehumanizing spaces for Students of Color? What are our rituals of resistance? How can we employ critical and humanizing pedagogy as an act of resistance? What does critical and humanizing pedagogy look like in urban education, both in-person and in online spaces? How does the urban education context span beyond place and space to the virtual realm? How are we disrupting the patterns we've been taught? While we know that institutional shifts have to be made and colonial, oppressive, hierarchical practices have to be dismantled, faculty must

simultaneously do the deep, reflective work needed to truly build humanizing hybrid programs.

## Conclusion

As graduate Students of Color continue to demand non-performative commitment from their institutions to meet their needs, real change can be made in the classroom by creating critical and humanizing learning spaces. While this study focused on hybrid HESA graduate preparation programs, these critical conversations are necessary for higher education programs in general as we make sense of the current state of higher education. This study not only highlights critical pedagogical tools, but is a call to action on how higher education practitioners, researchers, faculty members, and institutions at large must challenge and disrupt issues of systemic racism, including centering humanizing and transformative pedagogy as a praxis in hybrid programs.

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data would be de-identified and anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

**Ethics Approval** This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

**Consent to Participate** Written informed consent was obtained from participants of the study.

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