

# Building Community Online: Moving toward Humanization Through Relationship-Focused Technology Use

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## Abstract

This qualitative study aims to improve accessibility and equity in digital spaces by identifying the prevalent mismatch between online course design, student culture, and its connection to instructional design for teacher preparation programs. Utilizing feminist theory, we explore the intersection between community, identity, and learning within relational-focused small group online discussions for students enrolled in two online teacher preparation courses. Data for this study includes observations of teacher candidates, artifacts of their meetings, and reflective responses. The results indicate that relational-focused small group online discussions provide opportunities to expand accessibility and equity through community and deep learning while impacting future teachers' identities.

Keywords: online learning, online discussions, relationships, identity, feminist theory, feminist pedagogy

Gilpin, S., Rollag Yoon, S., & Miller, J. L. (2023). Building community online: Moving toward humanization through relationship-focused technology use. *Online Learning*, 27(3), 133-154. DOI: 10.24059/olj.v27i3.3583

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The online student population continues to grow as students look for convenience and flexibility, with the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating transitions from face-to-face to online delivery modes. The Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights (2020) surveyed 22,000 diverse American learners of all ages. Findings indicate that 59% of learners prefer online-only or hybrid models over exclusively face-to-face experiences, with the preference even stronger for Women and Black learners. Even though these groups prefer online and blended, they are underrepresented in online courses. When attending online courses, their persistence rates are lower than for onsite courses (Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights, 2020; Cheslock et al., 2018; Ortagus, 2017; Kaupp, 2012). One factor is the text-based asynchronous discussion board that all students across cultures widely report disliking. Students typically complete these transactional discussions individually, leaving them sometimes feeling isolated. This isolation is linked to a loss of engagement and connection in classes, having a negative impact on learning (Liu et al., 2009). Building and maintaining connections for all students requires using a culturally responsive lens (Ladson-Billings, 2021) that removes barriers that limit communication, relationships, and connection. (Luyt, 2013; Ojeda et al., 2014). These barriers include transactional interactions over relationship-focused interactions. Reflecting on this connection between online learning spaces and student access, we focused on relationship and community-focused student-centered instruction in our courses, emphasizing cooperation in learning and teaching. Exploring feminist principles led us to utilize small, student-led learning communities facilitated by synchronous video conferencing technologies.

As three teacher-educators, we see this need within our context of working in teacher-education programs. We aim to improve accessibility and equity in digital spaces for diverse teacher candidates. By shifting our instructional design, we offer a solution to the prevalent mismatch between online course design and student culture. To overcome this mismatch, we explore structural changes to online discussions that address academia's bias toward white culture, which often includes an individualistic approach to pedagogy (Ojeda et al., 2014). Though traditional theories have not intentionally sought to place diverse learners second in the educational environment, the fact that these theories tend to reflect the middle-class, white male experience (Flannery & Hayes, 2001) unintentionally does just that. Through examining feminist theories, we came upon a more inclusive mode of online course design that supports all learners by humanizing the learning experience (Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Online: A Digital Guide, n.d.). Yet, as we embrace feminist approaches, we often grapple with bringing a communal and student-centered approach that embraces collaboration, communication, and relationships to our online spaces. Leaning on the recommendation of Chick and Hassel (2009), we put our teaching philosophies and values at the forefront while working collaboratively to push technology's limitations to the back, sometimes perceived and other times misplaced. An additional layer of importance surrounds this study due to the ongoing teacher shortage (Center for American Progress, 2019) and the need for teacher preparation programs to retain prospective

teachers now more than ever. This work aims to improve teacher candidates' online discussions to build community, support learning, and increase program success for all.

Aligned with our commitment to access for students, we recognize the need to acknowledge the lens we bring to our work (Romero-Hall, 2021). We come to our teaching and learning understanding that teaching and research are mutually dependent, each informing the other. We must be mindful of this in our work as feminist scholars and teachers" (Light et al., 2015, p. 8). Our research backgrounds in pedagogical design, online learning, multimodality, sociocultural theory, and feminist theory impact our collective knowledge and practices. Ultimately, we are interested in pushing our pedagogy forward as we engage with opportunities for students to develop relationships that support their learning. Through the connections that we made at the intersection of our shared knowledge of theory, histories of research, and ongoing reflection of pedagogy, we came to an intentional focus on how a feminist approach to our online pedagogy in student discussions could shape students' experiences related to connection and have an impact on their overall experience, leading to persistence.

## **Literature Review**

The increased interest in online courses is promising as these courses are often equivalent in quality to face-to-face courses (Bowers & Kumar, 2015) and provide access to higher education for students who otherwise may not attend with the COVID-19 pandemic, likely increasing the prevalence and demand for online and blended format courses (Inside Higher Ed, 2021). To illustrate, a study by Bay View Analytics (2021) highlights how some students experienced the online environment out of necessity during the pandemic, found they liked learning this way, and now prefer it for part or all their courses. Online is no longer a trend; it is mainstream. However, studies show students have 10% to 20% lower persistence rates for online courses than for face-to-face courses (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Hart, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Part of the low persistence rates is perhaps because online courses continue to fall below face-to-face courses in terms of opportunities for student-to-student interaction (Paulsen & McCormick, 2020). Instructors often seek to address this deficit through text-based asynchronous discussion boards, even though students frequently report dissatisfaction with these discussions due to their isolating and transactional nature (Kauffman, 2015; Majid et al., 2015). The solitary nature of online learning then often takes on an all too familiar form. Students log on, do the assigned discussion boards, and submit assignments. Absent are laughter, organic conversations, learning from one another, student leadership, incidental sharing of photos and holiday plans, and the development of relationships that spill over into email/text exchanges and support students through the tough times. In fact, in online courses, relationships and community are sometimes nearly void. In the end, students and instructors are frustrated.

We also recognize issues of equity and inclusion that arise in online courses must be addressed as a central part of our practice as they contribute to lower persistence rates. As the demand for online learning grows, so does the "demographically diverse student population," including rural students, full-time workers, and stay-at-home mothers. If not for online courses,

many would not be able to pursue higher education. There is also a preference for online and hybrid learning opportunities for BIPOC and female students (Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights, 2020), as these groups who educational institutions previously marginalized can now access higher education in ways they could not get before the expansion of online learning. Yet often, these groups are underrepresented in higher education and even less well-represented in online courses (Cheslock et al., 2018; Ortagus, 2017). Even when students from historically underrepresented groups attend online courses, their persistence rates are lower than for onsite courses (Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights, 2020; Cheslock et al., 2018; Ortagus, 2017; Kaupp, 2012). We argue that the current situation of inequality was not an accident; it was designed. As asserted by Yeboah and Smith (2016) Smith, instructors need to be more intentional about designing online courses that consider cultural diversity and allow students to build relationships that lead to increased persistence. An opportunity exists for instructors to place value on collaboration, communication, and relationships supported in any learning environment by utilizing small learning communities (Gay, 2018; Plotts, 2020a, 2020b; Woodley et al., 2017). Chick and Hassel (2009) add that the feminist principles of shared power and leadership further support the development of relationships in small learning communities when they are student-led.

At the same time, developing research calls for synchronous video conferencing technologies to support these relational conversations (Berry & Kowal, 2020; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018). But when a synchronous component becomes part of an asynchronous course, this jeopardizes the flexibility and convenience online students desire (Raza et al., 2020; Seaman et al., 2018; Drefs et al., 2015; Simpson, 2013), along with the anonymity others prefer (Berry & Kowal, 2020). Some may not have the necessary bandwidth (Johnson & Cuellar-Mejia, 2014; Stanford, 2020) or access to quiet spaces (NYU Steinhardt, 2020) to participate fully. Recognizing these complexities of synchronous discussions and looking for ways to use technology to fully support a sense of community is necessary to bring equity to online learning communities. We argue that much of the research around persistence rates in online learning does not focus on the link between students' relationships with peers in ways that supports their learning and the interconnected role of identity, power, and the impact this texture has on their overall successful course completion.

As online communities are built, instructors can enable or constrain how students access the digital space, engage in dialogue, and ultimately share their identities. For example, digital tools in online learning spaces provide space to bring and play with multiple identities (Savin-Baden, 2010) by using multiple modes, ultimately allowing for more learning (Delahunty et al., 2014). This also aligns with feminist theory as networked communication offers the potential for disconnected performances of gender, disrupting power structures and space to present oneself as animals, robots, monsters, and other characters of multiple, indeterminate gender (Dean, 2006). Yet, the rigid nature of some online spaces, digital tools, or the instructional use of tools can limit student engagement by controlling how students interact and project themselves (Chick & Hassel, 2009; Garcia & Nichols, 2021). The way interactions are set up also allows students to

connect and share in authentic ways and to lead or be placed in a position where they are simply sharing with the class in a way that feels isolating or performative (Chick & Hassel, 2009). As students share information in digital spaces, they must also contend with an unlimited potential audience (Andrews & Smith, 2011), digital footprints (Dennen, 2021), and context collapse when their multiple identities come together in one online space, all causing tensions related to maintaining privacy (Dennen & Burner, 2017; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Students may feel supported or isolated depending on how opportunities to share information are created.

Information specific to fields of study is also important to consider as it contributes to the diversity of online learners, likely impacting their responses to pedagogical practices and course offerings. Online learners seeking teacher licensure that were part of this study are similar to online learners in other fields and, simultaneously, unique. Students in a teacher preparation course are not just college students but also becoming teachers. As teacher educators curate learning experiences for teacher candidates, they can model instructional design that students will carry over to their K-12 classrooms. For instance, technology facilitates the creation of community in digital spaces, as we model in our courses. Lindstrom (2021) notes that experiences such as this have been shown to shape the attitudes and beliefs of teachers and have a more significant impact on their future integration of technology than other factors, such as access.

Unlike other areas of study, nearly 80% of teacher candidates in education are female, and the vast majority are white. At the same time, the number of teacher candidates is steadily decreasing, leading to teacher shortages (Center for American Progress, 2019). This decrease is attributed, in part, due to perceptions of teaching as an undesirable career (Center for American Progress, 2019). Currently, the field of education is the least popular degree among undergraduates, with approximately 5% of the online courses offered to undergraduates being in education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). However, online learning might be untapped in its potential to address the teacher shortage by providing access to teacher preparation programs for prospective teachers, particularly those from more diverse backgrounds, which also indicate a preference for online learning (Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights, 2020). If online learning impacts the teacher shortage, it must be done in ways that nurture student success.

Within our study, we embrace feminist principles and bring forward a communal and student-centered approach that embraces collaboration, communication, and relationships in online learning spaces. Feminist theory influences our online pedagogy by emphasizing the need for learning to be collective, flexible, and relational (hooks, 1994; Kamler, 2001) while treating students as co-educators (Romero-Hall, 2021) rather than teacher-centered, transactional, and individual. Diversity and inclusion are key values of a feminist classroom (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1987) as feminist theory recognize hierarchies of power (Chick & Hassel, 2009; hooks, 1994), the intersectionality of identities (Carbado et al., 2013, hooks, 2000; Ludlow, 2002), and recognizes learners are more than their physical or digital presence (Romero-Hall, 2021). These tenets align with Freire's (1993) definition of humanization, as they center on a

need for dialogue between teachers and students, relying on the trust of students and the co-creation of text through ongoing reflection and action. At the same time, we see these qualities of humanization taken up in new and relevant ways through an explicitly feminist lens (hooks, 1994, p. 52). Bringing these tenets of feminist theory together, we see a direct link between feminist pedagogy, building relationships in online learning, and expanding access and equity, leading to higher persistence rates in online learning.

Through this qualitative study, we aim to improve accessibility and equity in digital spaces by investigating the impact of relational-focused small group online discussions on students enrolled in teacher preparation courses. An additional layer of importance surrounds this study of teacher candidates. Online learning might be untapped in its potential to address the teacher shortage by providing access to teacher preparation programs for prospective teachers, particularly those from more diverse backgrounds. Add to that, teacher candidates are not just learning; they are also learning to teach, and the pedagogy they experience in their coursework has been shown to impact the pedagogy they bring to K-12 spaces. Therefore, the potential exists to foster a new generation of social justice educators who can work for systemic change in K-12 schools due to their experiences in teacher education courses with a pedagogy grounded in feminist values like that shared in this study. This study is focused on the following research questions: 1) How does a relational-focused implementation of synchronous discussions impact online learning communities and learning? and 2) How do teacher candidates' experiences with online learning communities impact their teaching identities?

## Methods

This qualitative study (Erickson, 1986) focuses on 20 undergraduates and 10 graduates at a small midwestern liberal arts college who were enrolled in two online teacher preparation courses. Aligning with national teacher candidate trends, the majority of participants self-identified as white (95%), female (90%), and native English speakers (95%) (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Ages ranged from 18-40. Students in the study participated in three-to-four small group, student-led, online discussions facilitated by synchronous video conferencing technologies. Staci was the instructor for both courses. Stephanie and Jana were familiar with the program but did not teach these courses. Staci facilitated the synchronous discussions with teacher candidates over a 7-week summer term. Table 1 shares our working definitions of the feminist pedagogy tenets we incorporated into the discussions.

**Table 1**

*Feminist Pedagogy Tenets*

<b>Feminist Pedagogy Tenet</b>	<b>Our Working Definition</b>
Accountable collaboration	Mutual support and collaboration among students and instructor
Alternative histories & narratives	Realizations that life happens parallel to academics
Community building	Building community to ensure relationships, value, and belonging
Embodiment	Students as individuals that are more than their physical or verbal digital presence
Intersectional identity	Students are provided space to reveal identities and their barriers or opportunities for learning
Learner agency	Students as co-educators

Note: Adapted from Jaramillo Cherez and Romero-Hall (2022).

Table 2 lays out the discussion structure, including instructor and student actions, with the second column connecting the actions to specific feminist pedagogy tenets.

**Table 2**

*Our Discussion Structure*

<b>Instructor and Student Actions</b>	<b>Identified Feminist Pedagogy Tenets</b>
1. At the beginning of the courses, Staci assigned students to <i>small groups</i> of 3-5.	Community building
2. To optimally support the development of a community, students were in the <i>same small group</i> all semester.	Community building
3. Students were provided overarching lesson topics/objectives, the readings/viewings, and a starter prompt/directive while <i>students took turns facilitating the discussions</i> .	Learner agency

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>4. <i>Students took notes on a shared Google Document</i>, where they <i>shared their related experiences, questions, and resources</i>. An optional <i>icebreaker prompt</i> was included along with <i>check-in</i> to see how everyone was doing. Staci could provide feedback through further questions or resources after meetings.</p> <p>5. The discussions counted toward approximately 20% of the student’s final grades in the courses.</p> | <p>Accountable collaboration<br/>Alternative histories &amp; narratives<br/>Embodiment<br/>Intersectional identity</p> <p>Alternative histories &amp; narratives</p> |
|--|--|

Note: Staci used a form of *ungrading* (Kohn & Blum, 2020). Students received feedback as either *met/not met*. Suppose they met with their small group and submitted a Google Document with notes they received *met*. All groups received *met* and were provided extended time to meet without penalty.

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Data for this study was collected during the duration of the courses. The collection included:

1. Artifacts (student discussion notes from their live meetings, student-created resources, and instructor lesson plans)
2. Field notes/jottings documenting Staci’s interactions with students around the discussions (e.g., formal and informal via email, phone calls, and zoom).
3. Written student reflections of their experiences participating in the discussions were part of the reflective writing prompts that Staci typically includes in her courses. For instance, students were asked to reflect on “How have your peers and the activities you completed with them in this course impacted your learning?”

Our analysis focused on three of Gee’s (2011) Building Task Tools: the Significance Building Tool, the Identities Building Tool, and the Relationships Building Tool. Using these tools, we looked across candidate reflections to identify themes related to our research questions, including the significance candidates placed on their discussion experiences and how they connected this experience to their teaching and learning identities. After identifying these themes, we triangulated our data by comparing our analysis with the student discussion notes and jottings Staci took from interactions with candidates to confirm. Our analysis highlights specific quotes from candidates as they align with the overarching themes.

## Findings

Based on this data, we have identified three interpretations or themes that inform our conclusions: (1) Transformation, (2) Student Actions, and (3) Collaboration. Table 3 summarizes our data triangulation and connections to Gee’s (2011) Building Task Tools while providing a related student quote for each of the three themes.



**Table 3**  
*Data analysis summary*

Theme	Quote	Gee’s Building Task Tool	Connected Artifacts
Transformation	<p>Student A, Female — <i>After I led the final discussion, I feel like I am at a point in my life where I can do really good work in a group and alone. This makes me feel very versatile as an educator because that is the balance you need to have to be successful.</i></p>	<p>Identity Building Task</p>	<p>Student Discussion Notes  Staci’s Jottings</p>
	<p>Student D, Female — <i>The support, collaboration, and encouragement, from my VLC group drove my engagement and participation in what you’d typically consider a “discussion board”. In my past experiences, discussion boards were easy to “piggy back” off of other people’s responses. VLC truly did require full engagement and participation in the weekly readings and topics. <b>Overall, I will 100% take the concept of VLC’s and incorporate them into my classroom learning, rather than require my students to post to a discussion board. I believe that face to face conversations are much more effective and meaningful than posting to a forum and I fully plan to incorporate these into my plans in the upcoming school year</b></i></p>		

Student Actions	<p>Student B, Female — <i>It is really nice to get to know others from different campuses and apply all of our knowledge and experience together collaboratively! The discussion experience has been nothing short of fun and educational. I hope that other instructors can learn from this instead of a discussion board because those can get long, drawn on and boring.</i></p> <p>Student E, Female — <i>My peers made sure to give me suggestions that I could use to make my assignments better.</i></p>	Significance Building Tool	Student Discussion Notes  Staci's Jottings
Collaboration	<p>Student C, Male — <i>We will keep in touch with each other through email. We will be there for any support someone might need.</i></p> <p>Student F, Female – <i>We always keep in touch on our group chat (text messages and Snapchat). We check in on one another to make sure everyone is on track.</i></p>	Connections Building Tool	Students Discussion Notes  Staci's Jottings

**Transformation**

One theme we identified across students’ reflections was the transformation they showed in their perceptions of themselves and their competence around the content. The Identities Building Tool (Gee, 2011) suggests asking “what socially recognizable identity or identities the speaker is trying to enact or to get others to recognize” (p. 199). Across our data, we found examples of text where students identified ways that they saw themselves change toward a version of how they see themselves as teachers. They began providing one another with instructional support in ways that helped themselves and others learn the course content. Others shared they planned to use relational-small group discussions in their future classrooms. Some students mentioned this experience helped them become more confident students and future teachers. Student A in Table 3 indicated, “*this makes me feel versatile as an educator.*” By naming their future self as a flexible educator who will engage in these practices, the preservice teacher shows an identity they believe they have come to through their interactions.

**Student Actions**

Another theme related to the relational nature of the discussions nurtured student actions as they reported both enjoying the discussions and finding them helpful. Gee’s (2011) Significance Building Tool focuses on how words “build up or bring forward the significance for certain things” (p. 198). Throughout the data, students emphasized the *importance* of their

collective experience in these groups. Students shared that video conferencing technology made understanding course material, applying learning, and fully considering differing viewpoints easier. To illustrate, in Table 3, Student B shared, *“It is really nice to get to know others from different campuses and apply all of our knowledge and experience together collaboratively.”* Student E stated, *“My peers made sure to give me suggestions that I could use to improve my assignments.”* Finally, a student reported, *“this discussion experience has been nothing short of fun and educational.”*

### **Collaboration**

Moreover, a theme emerged related to students discussing how the discussions were safe and supportive spaces with evidence of community development, including trust, belonging, solidarity, and reciprocity. Gee’s (2011) Relationship Building Tool asks how words “are being used to build and sustain or change relationships” (p. 199) within groups. Students highlighted the importance of being in a group and its impact on how they identified with their groups; as Student C in Table 3 explained, *“We will keep in touch with each other through email. We will be there for any support someone might need.”* The use of “we” across this description highlights how the group members feel connected to each other rather than only reflecting on a personal “I” experience. The other words, focus on a forward motion of how this relationship will extend beyond the class.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study build on the assertions of other scholars (Gay, 2018; Plotts, 2020a, 2020b; Woodley et al., 2017), indicating that relational-type small group online discussions provide opportunities to expand accessibility and equity through community development and content learning while also impacting future teachers’ identities. The connection between feminist tenets of collaboration, community building, intersectional identity, and learner agency (Cherrez & Romero-Hall, 2022) became increasingly evident in the ongoing development of relationships in student-led (Chick & Hassel, 2009) small learning communities.

As we synthesized the analysis, we noticed links between collaboration, identity, and learning that point toward students’ humanizing experiences. As the instructor, Staci took on a passive role, making minimal contributions to the discussions. Instead, community and connection were developed by the student-led nature of the discussions that set the conditions for shared metacognition and application, culminating in learning. In part, future teacher identity development was also nurtured by their learning experiences. The peer interactions were valued and put students at ease, creating spaces for students to develop identities to include learner and teacher as they led discussions, supported their peers, and received feedback. Simultaneously, there was evidence of students acting as teachers for their peers and experiencing the community as learners influenced how they see themselves creating community as future teachers, which aligns with Lindstrom (2021), who highlights how teachers’ experiences such as this have shown to shape their attitudes and beliefs and impact their future pedagogy as K-12 educators.

Importantly, this back-and-forth between learner and teacher is a humanizing stance we want future teachers to embrace as they see themselves as both participants in their learning as students and co-constructors of knowledge through dialogue with their future students.

While most students highlighted value in the small group discussions, some tensions are essential to note. A student noted, *“I had some struggles with a classmate that was focused on ensuring they provided a detailed “right” answer rather than having a discussion between classmates which I had found challenging. I feel that took away from conversations that would have been more effective in the learning process.”* Another finding that is important to note is the teacher candidates in this study did not share any concerns about scheduling live meetings with their peers. Nor issues related to anonymity, access to high-speed Wi-Fi, or quiet spaces. These are all important considerations and common concerns shared by instructors, and these reasons are given as to why synchronous discussions are not part of online course design (Raza et al., 2020; Seaman et al., 2018; Drefs et al., 2015; Simpson, 2013; Berry & Kowal, 2020; Johnson & Cuellar-Mejia, 2014; Stanford, 2020; NYU Steinhardt, 2020). Perhaps, since this study was conducted during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the institution the teacher candidates in this study attended supported them in addressing many of these issues. Further, since most of society was “shut down,” it might be that students were mostly homebound, so synchronous meeting scheduling was not an issue. But as society reopens, we wonder if these access issues might reemerge. As a result, we consider how to address the experiences shared regarding peer interactions and steps to take to ensure student access is not impacted. Based on our findings, we offer three key instructional moves grounded in feminist pedagogy that teacher educators should incorporate in their pedagogy to improve accessibility and equity” — these recommendations are nothing new in terms of general pedagogical practices; however, they are often absent from the design of online discussions.

### **Offer Choice**

Both synchronous and asynchronous tools have benefits and limitations. As we continue to extend this work, we find that when giving students a choice between synchronous or asynchronous, most chose synchronous because it was more meaningful. But, having the choice is essential, honoring those students who found it challenging at particular times and needed flexibility. For students that desire real-time and dynamic interaction that is available (Kadkia & Owens; 2016; Majid et al., 2015; Mehall, 2020), along with the flexibility and convenience others crave (Raza et al., 2020; Seaman et al., 2018; Drefs et al., 2015; Simpson, 2013), threats to the anonymity are mitigated (Berry & Kowal, 2020), and issues of bandwidth are addressed (Johnson & Cuellar-Mejia, 2014; Stanford, 2020). Also, access to quiet spaces to participate fully (NYU Steinhardt, 2020) becomes more readily available for students through the option to participate using asynchronous communication that does not require the same kind of quiet environment needed for synchronous communication. For example, to create a text-based response to an asynchronous discussion board, one might do this from their mobile device while sitting outside at a park or other public space, as less bandwidth is required, so a cell signal or

other public WIFI would likely work. Yet, to engage in a video conferencing discussion, one would likely need to be indoors in a quiet space where they could access high-speed internet from their computer. Finding a quiet space like this might not always be possible. In sum, providing students with options is paramount and connected to the feminist pedagogy tenants of *alternative histories* and *intersectional identity* by creating flexibility concerning time, space, and modality. Thus, addressing hierarchies of power and making space for students' multiple identities while nurturing *learner agency*.

### **Students Lead**

Our data highlights the ongoing need to offer students opportunities to lead. Shifting the facilitation back into the hands of students and letting them steer the conversation is a more inclusive pedagogy (Chick & Hassel, 2009; Correia et al., 2019), focused on opportunities for them to bring in their own experiences and connections related to the course content as they support one another's learning (Buelow et al., 2018; Page et al., 2020). Within each small group, instructors should consider identifying discussion leaders on a rotational basis so that all students are engaged in a leadership role at some point and facilitate a discussion (Gilpin et al., 2022). Instructors then have the opportunity to mentor and coach students one-to-one when they are leaders, which can be empowering and transformative (Woodley et al., 2017). Also, instructors should consider providing students with the space to design the discussion prompts/activities (Gilpin et al., 2022). Students report enjoying discussions and feeling more connected to the conversation in which content-specific questions come directly from their peers—giving them choice and agency in the direction they go with course topics (Woodley et al., 2017). Overall, *learner agency* in the discussion design and leadership is another essential feminist pedagogy tenant to include in the design of online courses; doing so also again addresses hierarchies of power and makes space for students' multiple identities.

### **Provide Permeable Structures**

As highlighted earlier, providing student leadership provides access for more students. This is related to our third implication of providing permeable structures or frameworks that allow students to bring their identities in easily identifiable ways. So, while our framework provides structure, our findings, aligned with our lived experiences as educators, point to how we must balance that with what Jana calls "hands-off teaching." Hugo (2000) describes this as "power with rather than power over" (p. 206). Allowing power within the online course to be more evenly distributed across members is an empowering opportunity for traditionally marginalized learners (Cole, 2009). As we extend this work, we have observed that when students create their norms, set their own best times and modalities to meet, and have opportunities to lead on their own, while also having a voice in the design of discussion activities, the learning is more meaningful, engaging, and, therefore, accessible (Gilpin et al., 2022). Staci needed to ease into "hands-off teaching," so initially, she co-created discussion norms in collaboration with students. Through this process, they asked students what was

important to them, got feedback, and revised. This is also a great way for instructors to get to know their students—who they are, their interests, and their values (Plotts, 2020a; Woodley et al., 2017). Instructors may also share a draft of the structures as a starting place and ask students for feedback before revising. Chick and Hassel (2009) suggest instructors dialogue with students about their expectations to include the role of the instructor and students beyond an exercise of norm-setting. Instead, as a way to encourage student authority and bring space for students' voices early on in an online course. Even with "hands-off teaching," it is still imperative that instructors read, view, and listen consistently to all student dialogue posted on discussion boards or shared in synchronous meeting notes (Gilpin et al., 2022). And when necessary, instructors should clarify, ask questions, and support students in engaging with content, ensure all are following their discussion norms, and feel the discussions are safe spaces for all (Gilpin et al., 2022). By doing so, all students are welcome and learn through the very design of the online space, which is a hallmark of a feminist classroom.

## Limitations

There are limitations in this study that should be noted. These limitations flow from the design and results, connect to the research base, and provide a way forward. Perhaps the most pronounced limitation is that the students enrolled in the courses were upper-level and graduate students; thus, students may have found the course content more interesting and valuable. Further, the majority of students identified as white and female. Therefore, the first two limitations, taken together, call for future research to expand to include a more extensive and diverse study beyond teacher candidates, which would make this work more generalizable. Also, the study's design could be further improved through additional data collection methods beyond the open-ended responses, artifacts, and jottings. For example, semi-structured interviews (Erickson, 1986) could glean more in-depth information about these discussion experiences, their relational nature, and their impact on student learning. A study such as this would contribute to the triangulation of future findings. Each limitation provides an opportunity to improve and expand the research about online discussions, particularly those framed in feminist pedagogy.

## Conclusion

This study's results build on other scholars' arguments (Chick & Hassel, 2009; Gay, 2018; Plotts, 2020a, 2020b; Woodley et al., 2017) as the results indicate that relational-type student-led small group online discussions are a way forward as they expand accessibility and equity through community development and culminate in learning while also impacting future teachers' identities (e.g., the practices they bring to their K 12 classrooms). This work is crucial now as we reckon with widespread teacher shortages and grapple with ways to recruit and retain a diverse teaching corp. To improve persistence rates, institutions must respond to the ever more diverse and complex identities students bring to digital learning spaces. We call for these practices in online learning for teacher education. As hooks (1994) reminds us, this type of teaching calls for "*welcoming the opportunity to alter our classroom practices creatively so that*

*the democratic idea “of education for everyone can be realized”* (p. 189). This sense of making change and engaging in the work of building community is never done. Thus, the structural changes we bring forward in this paper are a starting point and not an ending, as the work of making digital spaces more inclusive and humanizing will never be done.

**Declarations**

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

The authors declared no funding for this work.

\*The institutional review board at the College of St. Scholastica, USA approved this research.

The lead author was a faculty member there when the data was originally collected.

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