Bantam Becomings
(Re)Claiming Online Spaces for (more than) Humans

Mary Rice and Shernette Dunn

Humanizing research online claims to engage practices that care for human learners. Even so, many of the recommended practices are unreflective about the universalizing ethic from which they draw. We argue that humanizing online learning becomes tangled in broader university aims that expect care to happen aside from underlying histories of (de)humanization. We propose Bantam becomings as a way for online teachers to appreciate smaller opportunities for becoming-with learners and technologies that have the potential to (re)claim online spaces as more-than-human space.

Keywords: humanizing online learning, bantam becomings, decolonizing online learning, care pedagogies online, ethics and agencies online

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A graduate student Mary supervised accepted a contract at another university to teach a course that had been approved by a professional organization for its universal design competencies during the summer. At a meeting, Mary asked the student what she was learning about teaching that might help her research project about underserved youth striving to survive in-school settings. At first, the student was unsure since the teaching contexts seemed different, but then she told Mary about a learner who had introduced herself in the online class as African American and a mother,

Mary Rice
Albuquerque, NM 87210
Email: maryrice@unm.edu

Shernette Dunn
Tamarac, Fl 33321
Email: sdunn7@fau.edu

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and then had suddenly stopped logging on. “Were you able to locate or re-engage her?” Mary asked. The student teaching the online course lamented that she had just assumed that the online learner was busy and did not care to finish, but now that they were talking, maybe that learner needed support. “I spend my time with children hoping someone will help them, and then I go online with learners assigned to me, and I shrug my shoulders,” the student teaching the online course said. Mary encouraged the online teacher to try to contact the online learner or someone at the university and see what could be done to reconnect the learner to support—if not in time for this semester, for next. To end the meeting, Mary and the student teaching the online class mused that what is big, looks small, and what is small, feels big when thinking about support for learners.

Online learning has become an increasingly common modality for learners of various ages and grade levels (Castro & Tumibay, 2021; Greenhow et al., 2022). As online courses have become more commonplace, attunements are warranted to serve those who enroll in online courses because their life circumstances or personal preferences preclude in-person learning. Some communities of scholars in online learning began to use the term *humanizing* to describe various efforts to advance the pedagogy of care, online (Noddings, 1995). Not all advocates of *humanizing* online learning embrace the same theories of how to *humanize*. The term *humanism* has been used over time to refer to humans’ superior faculty of Reason. The inherent superiority of HuMANs—yes, principal texts expressly refer to (white) Man—positioning him above other entities and endowing him with special rights. However, *humanizing* online learning does not operate outside of broader university aims that expect care to occur without having to acknowledge underlying histories of (de)humanization. Moreover, it can position students against teachers, students against students, and teachers against another in competition for attention in the instructional materials, acknowledgment, labor distribution, and respect. In this essay, we position humanism in universalist thinking and also demonstrate how the critical (post)human offers opportunities to re-orient toward the *humanism* that for online learning is necessarily (more than) human while explicitly working against (de)humanization.

Positioning Humanism in Universalist Thinking

Humanism in its historical forms, expressly and intentionally left out people of Color, the poor, and women from the definition of *human* (Kristeller, 2008). For example, Jackson (2020) critiqued the Chain of Being logic advanced by prominent humanists, such as Hegel and Heidegger, that Black(end) people from the African continent and framed them as incapable of conceiving of their worlds. The explicit conclusion was that Black(end) people were inhuman. This and other principal tenets of *humanism* have since widely been exposed as colonial, racist, sexist, oppressive and environmentally degradative (Petrovskaya, 2023). As authors of this paper, we are a white woman with European heritage and a Black woman of Jamaican descent. We convene together as schedules permit us to write together and share experiences. We have seen how, even with *humanism’s* unsavory past, it is still popularly advocated as being unproblematized and conflict-free, often as a set of self-evident or universalist reasonings.

Some advocates of *humanization* rely on cognitive theories (e.g., Dunn & Brown, 2021; Karakaya, 2021). For students to persist, teachers must enact pedagogical practices, such as providing explicit instruction and active feedback (Dunn, 2024; Karakaya, 2021; Murtafi’ah & Pradita, 2023). Such strategies are supposed to support students who may not have the educational background, resources, or support, to appear successful in educational settings. However, for these *humanizing* practices like feedback to be effective, educators will need to consider how feedback operates in the context of the relationships between them and their students (i.e., how they view their students as being worthy of feedback and worthy of learning). Examining these perspectives allows the instructor to reflect on their own *humanizing* philosophy and practices.

Those who have historically had difficulty accessing educational opportunities, such as learners of Color, learners in poverty circumstances, multilingual learners and learners identified with various disabilities, or who exhibit differences as learners are among the most often judged as *not ready* for online learning or lacking intellectual potential (Dunn & Brown, 2021). The *humanizing*, or care element when drawing from theories, is acknowledging that students need additional support

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and working to provide it for the learners without them having to ask. Students regarded as *not ready* for online learning can also be rejected from online learning and told they are not a good fit (Rice & Carter, 2015). To us, it is not accidental that the code word *fit* is how individuals from these same groups are told they are unchosen for other educational and employment opportunities (Browning et al., 2019; Hemphill & Kulik, 2017).

While *humanizing* principles purport student centric behaviors where the instructor focuses on the students' needs and provides direct support, another component of online learning promotes self-directed and independent learning. This aspect of *humanizing* is somewhat paradoxical because within the self-directed domain, students are expected to have or acquire the knowledge, skills, resources needed to be successful in the educational domain (Croft et al., 2010; Kebritchi et al., 2017). Additionally, self-directedness is a cultural expectation that varies between groups (e.g., Ahmad & Majid, 2010). Cooperation and group goal achievement for reasons other than capitalism are more valued in some communities.

There are also universal views of cultural responsiveness embedded in some *humanizing* discourse, even though there are a range of cultural expectations and preferences for learning in various situations. For example, some groups respond to metaphors and some groups do not have that as part of their repertoire. For groups that do respond to metaphors, it also depends on what metaphors are being used in what types of circumstances and how those metaphors are presented (Buchowski, 1996). Thus, cultural responsiveness and *humanization* and universal design are not interchangeable.

Humanization scholarship has also included *fostering* caring discourse by providing information about campus services, using inclusive language, and promoting a growth mindset (Fuentes et al., 2021). Others view *humanization* using critical theory lenses. Specifically, Mehta and Aguilera (2020) argued that universalist approaches are insufficient for those who have historically been underserved in-person and online. In the case of the online learner who stopped logging on during the vignette at the beginning of this paper, a professionally designed course with clear objectives, explicit instruction, soft due dates, a discussion board, were all provided, and they were insufficient in helping the African American mother to be successful as an online learner.

Universalist approaches cannot provide a universal answer, even when there are kind and caring people behind them. First, many online teachers may already think that they use universalist strategies, such as explicit instruction and active feedback behaviors (González, 2010; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2021). Indeed, many instructors might be, since these and similar strategies are required in higher education as part of regular and substantive interaction from the Higher Education Opportunity Act (Higher Education Opportunity Act, Pub.L. 110-315, 122 Stat. 3078, codified as amended at 34 C.F.R. §600.2). Second, teachers do not control all aspects of design and delivery. For example, in K12 online learning, teachers do not design lessons independently; companies provide the curriculum (Archambault & Crippen, 2009; Crouse et al., 2018). This has the potential to be increasingly true with personalization and adaptive learning—more recent forms of universalist models. Third, online learning environments require emotional co-laboring for teachers and students, which they perform together, rather than a teacher performing for students ahead of time (Dathe et al., 2024).

To engage ethically with *humanism*, critical theorists remind us of the implications of actions and question whether there are human rationalities and agencies or whether there are only structures guiding action (Kincheloe, 2008). These structures can be deep, like the sea cables that carry the internet, while following the same maritime pathways as the middle passages—the infrastructure for enslavement (Russell, 2024). Thus, it is not only human intentions or decision-making that deserve concern, but the effects of actions. People might know *what* they do, and they also might know *why* they do what they do. However, they might not be aware of *what their doing does* (Petrovskya, 2023). Amid important questions about structural inequities and how they affect people, we need more thought about how to bring this thinking together to consider the (non)human, as well.

Becoming-With as Bantam Becomings

Critical (post)humanist perspectives reflect a materially embedded, multi-layered, nomadic entity reflective of human and (non)human agents

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with technological mediations. Haraway (2016) described the (post)human through companion species. In Latin, the word companion, *com panis*, means "together with, sharing bread." In this vein, a (post)human is becoming -with other-than-humans and becoming more-than-humans at the same time (Haraway, 2016). Humans are constituted by and constitute the world (Haraway, 2016). Experiences of 'being human' in this frame, do not have to be universal; nor does there have to be a hierarchy between humans, nor between humans and non-humans; what is necessary is attention to specific materialities (Bignall & Braidotti, 2019).

When universalization of *humanizing* experiences ceases to be our goal, we can make *Bantam* becomings. A Bantam is a small breed of chicken that is very feisty. Jackson (2020) also noted how Toni Morrison used the image of a rooster as a symbol of manhood denied to Black(ened) men in her novel *Beloved*. We are deliberate in our use of a small chicken to evoke a similar symbolic interest in personhood through the evocation of an animal, while also eschewing the notion that bigger is better and everything must be scaled up to be useful. Bantam becomings are small, rather than large, yet they are noticeable to the teacher and students having them. Mary and the online teacher she was mentoring were seeking a Bantam becoming with reference to one student, that might also be large in the effect it might have both on the student teaching the class and the student who needed support to finish the class.

Universalist assumptions assert that there can be a course and a set of practices that operate as a script where all students can be successful every time. Just contacting the online student to remind them to log on is not the same as the *com panion-ship* needed to find out the material considerations that are preventing the student from participating. Did the student lose her job or access to her internet connection? Did her child become ill? Is she having a difficult time finding a time or place to study? Did her educational or professional goals change? Any of these things could have happened and none of them could be solved by universalist course design. Instead, all would require emotional co-laboring between student and teacher–where they have to trust each other enough to lay out all the material concerns and then discover together what might be done to address them.

Another example of a Bantam beginnings might be when a teacher changes part of the course to attend to an individual students' material hopes, goals, dreams, or family. We have both had students explain to us they need our courses to earn pay raises. Sometimes, these pay increases are especially needed to help family members who have disabilities or other challenges. We could decide these students are unserious or only after the money or trying to access sympathy so courses will be easier. Instead, we share an understanding of this situation with our students. We remodel our roles for *com panion-ship* to move beyond those of professors to consider ways to bring materialities in favor of the students, perhaps by redesigning check-ins, or adding opportunities for celebration. Particular understandings also shift our relational orientation to the rest of the class because it reminds us that we do not realize what students might not be sharing with us. It is true that the online teacher Mary is mentoring might find out that the online student in her course is having a hard time understanding a concept or struggling to navigate the course. These issues might be possible to address with universalist design. Yet, because of the bureaucracy surrounding such designs, making substantial changes to the course design, structure, or grading scheme after the term has started might not be possible. What would be required is emotional co-labor to move into *com panion*-ship in order to (re)configure the materialities for the students' benefit.

The notion of Bantam being related expressly to an animal also reminds us of the necessity of removing or questioning the hierarchies in place between human/(non)human. Jackson (2020) wrote about the need to disrupt the authority of the term *animal* over *humanization* to undermine the ways in which the Chain of Being has been used to do harm. Jackson (2020) wrote, "The animal' as a symbol, as trope, as locus of possibility, must be rethought and transformed; otherwise, it will continue to animate antiblack discourse and institute itself biopolitically" (p. 53). We must engage directly with those materialities with which we find ourselves and our learners for meaningful activity to occur. Even if the student Mary supervises can locate the learner that stopped logging on and finds that whatever happened is something that cannot be mended by her, the learner, or the university, the move for solidarity did work for both the teacher and the learner. It is true that this takes time to do, and that the university will not compensate it or even acknowledge it in most cases. That is anoth-

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er reason why these are Bantam becomings—because they might not be noticed, and there is often no way to do all that could be done. Teachers inevitably do only a Bantam portion of what could be done.

Moving toward Solidarity with Bantam Becomings

Initiating and maintaining Bantam becomings in online teaching and learning responds to questions about agency by drawing on Mohanty's (2003) recommendation that we do not waste effort striving for an untenable sisterhood in the academy, but instead work toward solidarity with our students and with everyone and everything on the online teaching landscape. This means that we will have to acknowledge uncomfortable circumstances. For example, if an instructor decides to set up for universalist boundaries by restricting when they will answer emails from students, then we might end up having to attend to that email because the students seek alternative support from us. We might also need to have uncomfortable conversations about who is finishing online courses and why universal structures for access failed or why something that was intended as culturally responsive in fact, was not. Such solidarity and our roles as educators in the process of learning to teach online will emerge through dialogue about complicated notions of home, belonging, nation, and community. Such becomings provide starting points for addressing the tensions competitiveness and pain we have been enduring as a result of universalism (Mohanty, 2003).

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