Failing and Getting Back Up with a Solutionary Approach: Developing Critical Consciousness in a Humane Education Graduate Course
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Abstract: When a graduate course in humane education needed a massive overhaul, the solutionary approach (Weil, 2020) seemed to be an incredible pathway forward. This paper will situate the solutionary approach within humane education and highlight critical professional development opportunities undertaken by the professor as well as successes and challenges regarding attempts at moving theory into practice in a graduate, asynchronous online setting.

Keywords: humane education, solutionary approach, critical consciousness

"I'd rather try and fail than never try at all" (O'Brien, 2003). While iterations of this quotation can be attributed to a variety of authors, the sentiment remains constant - while efforts may not always pay off, the attempt is critical in our development and (hopefully) eventual growth. In fall 2020, I was named the Professor for Humane Education for my college. The professorship was established by an incredible community member with a clear purpose: to "encourage and perpetuate the teaching of humane education concepts and methods in public and private elementary and secondary schools through the support of teacher preparation in humane education" (Gilmore, 2020). It is a two-year professorship and my current term as the Professor for Humane Education ended during summer 2022. The updates that I have made to the course will be shared with the next professor.

Humane education aligned with my own teaching philosophy in that it focused on respect for all living things and the role we play in a shared environment. However, the term was new for me and I needed to dedicate significant time to my own professional development in order to successfully manage the scope of the professorship. One dedicated task associated with this role was the teaching of at least one course in humane education.

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This article will focus specifically on the course ELED 5345 - Humane and Environmental Education. This course is an online, asynchronous summer electives course offered one time per year as an online, asynchronous summer electives course offered one time per year as an option for graduate students to take as they pursue their masters in elementary education.

The article will highlight updates and describe the rationale for these changes. Then, it will share how these updates were received by the enrolled graduate students and lessons learned to enhance the course for summer 2022. My review of student perceptions is based on data collected through the university-sponsored course evaluation which is an optional assignment for students as well as the course evaluation that I had students complete as an assignment embedded within the course. The primary goal of this article is to address the research question: What are the perceptions of graduate students enrolled in this course regarding course content and accessibility? I will do this by sharing more about the course and incorporating student feedback from course evaluations.

Literature Review

Up until being named the Professor for Humane Education, my area of study had focused on social studies methods and social justice education. While I could see a clear connection between my research focus and humane education, I knew that I needed to dedicate significant time to learning more about these concepts. The literature reviewed below will define and describe humane education and will then narrow in on the solutionary approach - a concept to which I was initially drawn due to its focus on action and activism.

Humane Education

Humane education has a longer history than I anticipated. It is most often associated with George Angell who, in the late 1800s, created this field in his attempt to address social injustices in general, and to prevent cruelty to animals more specifically (MSPCA-Angell, 2021). Humane education gained traction during the suffrage movement and various laws were passed in support of, and requiring the teaching of, humane education (Preston, 1928). In current educational programming, humane education is most visible as push-ins where animal welfare organizations come to classrooms to teach about care for animals. However, humane education is much more complex. Various organizations - including the Humane Education Coalition, the Academy of Prosocial Learning and the Institute for Humane Education all coordinate programming, training, and resources for teachers to utilize in their classrooms. Their definition of humane education overlaps and includes several key elements, which will be described in greater detail below.

The Humane Education Coalition (2021) utilizes the formal definition from the Academy of Prosocial Learning for humane education as encouraging "cognitive, affective, and behavioral growth through personal development of critical thinking, problem solving, perspective taking, and empathy as it

relates to people, animals, the planet, and the intersections among them."

The Institute for Humane Education identifies four essential elements for humane education:

1. Acquire knowledge by preparing [students] to be enthusiastic and effective researchers who are able to obtain accurate information about interconnected global challenges and discern fact from opinion and conjecture;
2. Think deeply by developing their critical-, creative-, strategic-, and systems-thinking skills;
3. Make compassionate and responsible choices by fostering wonder and appreciation for the natural world; empathy for people and animals; and commitment to doing the most good and least harm;
4. Focus on solutions by providing opportunities to collaboratively engage in problem-solving; implement ideas; and assess and improve upon them (Institute for Humane Education, 2021).

My social studies heart was thrilled at the push for critical thinking, research and problem-solving and I was very excited to learn more as I worked to revamp the graduate course. This led me into more complex concepts within humane education. Specifically, after being introduced to the concept of a solutionary, I knew that I wanted to learn more and I hoped that it would have a long term, positive impact on my own praxis.

Solutionary Approach

In an age where we are working to overcome the isolation of a global pandemic, it is imperative that we are intentional in ourselves and our students as we work to develop compassionate citizens empowered to take action through a solutionary approach. Zoe Weil is the co-founder and current president for the Institute for Humane Education. She is considered to be a leader in her field and she is most known for her contribution with regards to solutionary approaches. A solutionary can be both a noun and an adjective. When used as a noun, a solutionary is a person who "identifies inhumane, unsustainable, and unjust systems and then develops solutions that are healthy and equitable for people, animals, and the environment" (Institute for Humane Education, 2021). This approach is characterized by doing the most good and least harm to people, the environment, and animals.

While participating in a Solutionary Micro-credential Training, I was exposed to a solutionary scale, which can also be found in Weil's (2016) text, The World Becomes What We Teach:

Figure 1. Solutionary Scale

EMERGING	DEVELOPING	SOLUTIONARY	MOST SOLUTIONARY
The solution, while well-intentioned, does not yet address root and/or systemic causes (and may produce unintended negative consequences to people, animals, or the environment).	The solution addresses root and/or systemic causes but produces unintended negative consequences to people, animals, adn/or the environment.	The solution addresses root and/or systemic causes and strives not to produce unintended negative consequences to people, animals, or the environment.	The solution *significantly and strategically* addresses root and/or systemic causes and does not harm people, animals, or the environment.

I think back to various projects I worked

on with my 6th grade and 9th grade social studies students and can only imagine how the impact of these various projects could have been enhanced had I utilized a scale like the image above as a source of reflection for my students.

Theory to Practice

After completing the Micro-credential training, reading seminal texts regarding humane education and attending the virtual APHE National Humane Education Conference, I felt like I could reinvigorate the graduate humane education course at my university to reflect current trends in the field of humane education and create a meaningful experience for my graduate students. In this section, I will provide a brief context for the course and follow with descriptions of each of the major assignments that my students worked to complete. Each of the course updates were incorporated with three goals in mind:

1. To introduce graduate students to concepts in humane education;
2. To provide a space for graduate students to practice implementing lessons that align with the mission of humane education; and
3. To empower graduate students to take lessons learned in this course and apply them in their classrooms.

This course was a five-week online, asynchronous course offered as an elective for students in the graduate master's program for elementary education. Since it is not a required course, I actively worked to recruit through presentations to advisors and by offering scholarships for students who enrolled in the course. These

scholarships were funded by the Professorship and were known as the G.W. Willingham scholarships. Ultimately, I was able to enroll six students.

All students had the same undergraduate degree in elementary education and all but one attended the same university for both undergraduate and graduate programming. All but one student also indicated that they have not had a leadership position and would not be in a leadership position for that upcoming fall. Experience level for the students varied between not yet having been a teacher of record to fifteen years in the classroom. I did not know my students' backgrounds prior to enrollment but assumed the majority of them would be traditional classroom teachers based on my own experiences with other graduate courses. To that end, the HEART, ProjectWILD, and RedRover Readers projects all aligned with curricular resources that a classroom teacher could implement. The solutionary case study was meant to be an opportunity for these students to work on a presentation they would give to their administrators in the fall. Each of these projects is described in greater detail below.

In the following sections, I will share examples of specific practices from the online, asynchronous course mixed with feedback received from students. One survey, the course evaluation supplied by the university, is optional and anonymous. The other survey was completed as an embedded quiz in my course content. It was not anonymous, but scores were given for completion. . I did not grade these quizzes until after I was done assessing all other course assignments so as to avoid

any unintended bias with grading assignments that were not completion-based. This particular paper is less formalized research and more of a professor's attempt to honor input from students. This was an incredibly small sample size and the professor reviewed each of the written statements from students several times. With such a small sample size, consistent and repetitive feedback was not common. Instead, the professor was left to react to the feedback based on the statements and the professor's own evaluation of the work that students submitted.

There were various opportunities to practice and develop confidence embedded throughout the course. These transformational learning experiences included simulations, role-playing, certification programs, and opportunities for individual reflection on their own schools and classrooms.

RedRover Readers Certification

The ultimate goal of RedRover Readers online program is for participants to learn discussion techniques that promote critical thinking, perspective-taking, student engagement and literacy (RedRover, 2021).Using an external partnership, the graduate students completed an online workshop that required them to dedicate six hours for training in social emotional learning and facilitating critical thinking conversations. Each graduate student was mailed a children's book and classroom resource binder to use for their project.

Over the course of the professional development, the graduate students

interacted with a RedRover Reader training specialist and engaged in various discussion boards while also learning teaching techniques that could be applied to the classroom. Based on graduate student feedback, one of the most immediately applicable strategies was the concept of above ground and below ground questions. The goal for our graduate students is to focus on intentional crafting of below ground questions.

Figure 2. Question Tree
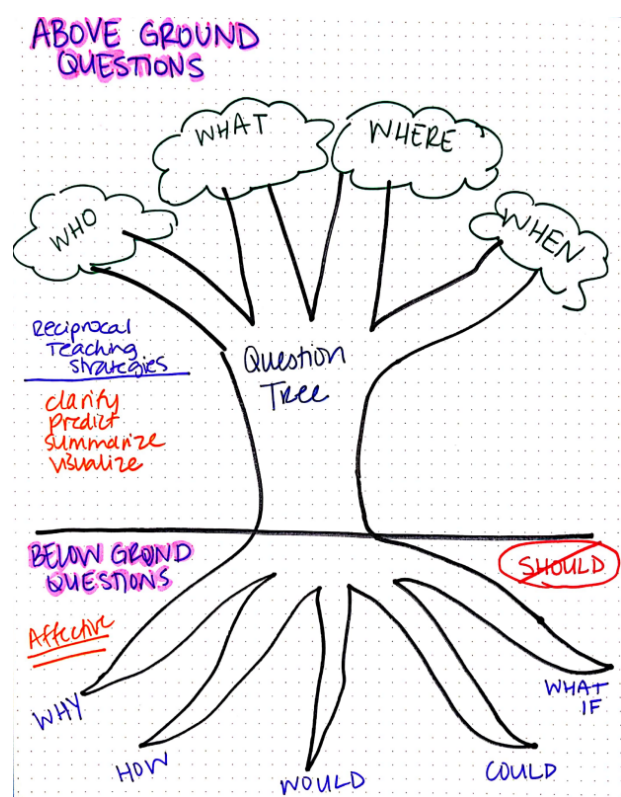
Implementing lessons learned throughout the training, the graduate students shared their emerging understanding by filming their reading of one of the RedRover texts to a partner from class. These recordings included questions that were scripted by the graduate students to facilitate perspective-taking and critical thinking skill development. After successful completion of this training, graduate

students enrolled in my course were able to add a RedRover Readers certification to their resumes.

Figure 3. Graduate student with RedRover text
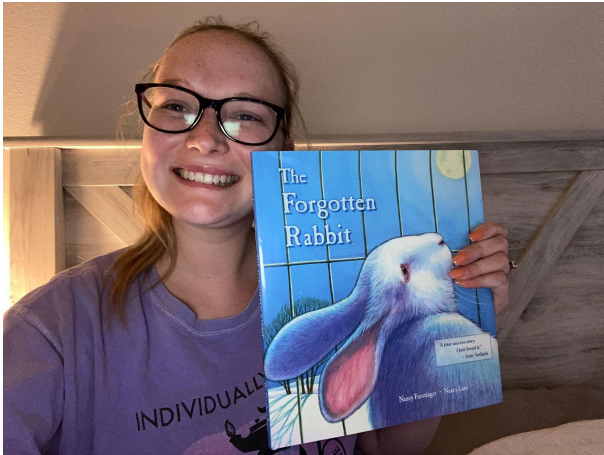
HEART PLC Small Group

Additionally, graduate students had access to a comprehensive humane education resource guide through HEART, a New York-based nonprofit public charity (HEART, 2021). Specifically, the graduate students were able to download Justice for All: Elementary Guide, which is a free online resource that includes lesson plans, activities and worksheets to help students think critically and develop solutions for contemporary social justice issues that our world faces. The graduate students worked with a partner to select one lesson and one activity each to prepare and facilitate. After completing these lessons, the graduate students reflected on it and overwhelmingly shared that they liked the accessibility of the lesson plan and resources: "I feel that the students will be able to follow along easily, and they will enjoy the lesson. I plan to incorporate the

HEART PLC lessons in my plans for this upcoming year. I feel that while using the lesson and activities, our students will be able to care for people, the environment, and their pets" (Anonymous Student #3, 2021). Another student shared that the "benefits from engaging in the HEART small group project was, I got to connect with a classmate and learn various lessons and ideas from her teaching" (Anonymous Student #4, 2021).

ProjectWILD Certification

ELED 5345 is titled Humane and Environmental Education. In order to be intentional with regard to addressing Environmental Education, I decided to incorporate an online, synchronous six-hour certification for the graduate students known as ProjectWILD. ProjectWILD is an "interdisciplinary conservation and environmental education program that focuses on wildlife and habitat. The goal of ProjectWILD is to develop awareness, knowledge, skills, and commitment resulting in informed decisions, responsible behavior, and constructive actions concerning wildlife and the environment" (Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies, 2021). I had previously participated in ProjectWILD training in an online, asynchronous setting and earned the certification in classroom facilitation as well as ProjectWILD training.

The training involved learning more about the history of ProjectWILD, engaging in four activities from the manual, and reflecting on these lessons from the perspective of the teacher. While the HEART PLC project allowed for students

to engage with each other, ProjectWILD was the only opportunity for the class to engage as a collaborative whole with the instructor. While the students were excited to have received another set of free resources that was TEKS-aligned in both science and social studies content, the training was definitely mixed with mixed reviews. Like RedRover Readers, graduate students were able to add a certification to their resumes upon completion of the training. Unlike RedRover Readers, graduate students were only able to engage with ProjectWILD as students rather than practice facilitating a lesson. For this particular endeavor, we met synchronously for a four-hour training on a Saturday. This decision was made because it was how my own certification had been structured and I wanted to keep things as simple as possible. However, multiple students, including Anonymous Student # 2 (2021), "didn't like that [she] had to take up a Saturday to complete this training for class." Despite this, one student wrote that "If I had to pick one thing [I enjoyed the most], it would be the ProjectWILD component" (Anonymous Student #1, 2021).

Figure 4. Graduate student with ProjectWILD Resources

Solutionary Case Study

Graduate students were provided with various articles and TEDTalks as well an excerpt from *The World Becomes What We Teach* from Weil regarding the solutionary approach. These resources focused on vision and ideas for developing solutionary schools that meet the goals of humane education. The graduate students were tasked with evaluating the provided purpose, vision, mission, and promise of the solutionary school against their current campuses. They then continued by looking for opportunities to incorporate solutionary approaches to improve their campuses. These papers were presented to peers via an online, asynchronous discussion board in which students shared a recorded link.

With such a small participant group, adequately reflecting on perceived impact is difficult. Some students really struggled while others truly enjoyed it. Critique is included below, but it is necessary for me to show that negative perceptions of this assignment were not unanimous. According to one student, "I am glad I have my paper to share with my administrators. I think this would be a good way of sharing my thoughts and ideas with them at the beginning of the school year" (Anonymous Student #4, 2021). My goal that graduate students would be comfortable applying concepts from the course in their professional environments appears to be likely for this student.

This ended up being one of the most difficult assignments for students for a variety of reasons. One assumption that I made as a professor was that my graduate

students would be familiar with the concept of writing a research paper. While I provided a template and brief guidelines on components, I did not focus on providing direct instruction on how to write a research paper. This was overwhelming for a majority of my students and made it difficult for them to authentically engage with the actual content.

Another issue with this paper is, at the time of instruction, I still felt a bit unclear and overwhelmed with how to apply a solutionary approach. I viewed this paper and my evaluation of it as an opportunity to learn from my students.Ultimately, I feel that the focus of the paper made it difficult for students to actually apply the solutionary approach and believe that some of the changes I plan to implement for this upcoming summer will address this issue.

Results

Overall, the course received a high rating - 4.01 on a 5.0 scale. I had hoped for higher scores. I know that with only six students enrolled that any negative commentary would bring down the scores more dramatically than a course with higher enrollment. That being said, there were portions with which I agreed and portions with which I did not agree. One student noted that the amount of work was demanding considering the time frame when compared with other courses. This is a source of frustration for me because I worked to ensure that the workload was equivalent to a full course load. Students had three assignments to work through each week.One student wrote that "some people dropped [the author]] for other

classes in the future because of this class." This was true for one student, who did actually drop a future course with me later that summer. I also want to offer some context about the group assignments. Students who had communicative and professional partners articulated that this class was one of the best and that the group work was something they truly enjoyed. The partners that disliked collaborating due to one partner's lack of professional courtesy would most definitely not have enjoyed it. That is reflected in the evaluations.

The Course Evaluations will be included at the end of this article in Appendix A.

Discussion

To recall the sentiment from my introduction - it is better to have tried and failed than to not even begin the attempt. As educators, I hope that we understand the relationship between teaching and learning. We are not *only* teachers. We are lifelong *learners*. I attempted to share what I believe to be a critical component of humane education with my students. And, I wanted them to be comfortable with applying concepts from the course moving forward. Students left my course with two certifications to add to their resumes, one virtual resource, and two physical classroom resources that were mailed to them. They approached their assignments in collaborative ways and practiced facilitating various lessons and activities.

However, I know that I need to radically reimagine the solutionary case study. I know that I need to clarify expectations with regard to research papers and provide

space for students to really unpack the solutionary approach as incremental assignments building up to their application of the solutionary approach to a self-identified issue. Additionally, ProjectWILD must be adapted to fit better with a summer course. My initial thought is to film the 6-hour training in smaller chunks and divide them up over the course of two weeks. These chunks would be filmed so that the students could access them online, asynchronously and submit evidence of completion in a Dropbox. I could also give them the opportunity to facilitate one small lesson via a mixed media discussion board where students would submit a recorded link of their facilitation and classmates would "reply" with images or PDFs of their completed work.

While there will always be room for improvement, I again want to refer back to my three goals:

1. To introduce graduate students to concepts in humane education;
2. To provide a space for graduate students to practice implementing lessons that align with the mission of humane education; and
3. To empower graduate students to take lessons learned in this course and apply them in their classrooms.

The description of each of the major assignments highlights my commitment to goal 2. Reflective comments from several of my students shows that my graduate students did, in fact, feel empowered to apply concepts from the course to their classrooms: "[The course] made me see that I CAN incorporate things about the environment and humane education into my lesson plans seamlessly - in a way that is natural, fun, and educational for my students" (Anonymous Student #5, 2021)

Additionally, one student wrote, "I loved access to the resources. I am going to use the RedRover book, the Project WILD curriculum and the HEART PLC books in my class instruction" (Anonymous Student #3, 2021).

While humane education may be a new(er) concept for the readers of this article, I hope that it has inspired further research on the innovative concepts of humane education, which focus on critical thinking and perspective-taking for practitioners. I also hope that my vulnerability with the shortcomings of my course, as well as my commitment to get back up and try again are valuable to educators as they seek to innovate in their classrooms. I am truly excited for what comes next!

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Appendix A: Course Evaluations

	Total 75	Very Good(%) 48	Good(%) 17	Average(%) 25	Poor(%) 7	Very Poor(%) 3	No Opinion(%) 0	Avg 4.01	Std Dev 1.12

Question	Total	Very Good(%)	Good(%)	Average(%)	Poor(%)	Very Poor(%)	No Opinion(%)	Avg	Std Dev
The course as a whole was	4	2 (50%)	1 (25%)		1 (25%)			4.00	1.41
The clarity of course objectives was	4	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)				4.25	0.96
The usefulness and relevance of course content to course objectives was	4	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)				4.25	0.96
The organization of the course was	4	2 (50%)		1 (25%)	1 (25%)			3.75	1.50
The instructor's overall effectiveness in teaching was	4	2 (50%)		2 (50%)				4.00	1.15
The variety and appropriateness of learning activities in this course was	4	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)				4.25	0.96
The instructor's ability to present and explain course content was	4	2 (50%)		1 (25%)	1 (25%)			3.75	1.50
The instructor's use of examples and illustrations was	4	2 (50%)		1 (25%)	1 (25%)			3.75	1.50
The instructor's enhancement of students' interest in course content was	4	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)				4.25	0.96
My confidence in the instructor's knowledge was	4	2 (50%)		2 (50%)				4.00	1.15
The instructor's enthusiasm was	4	2 (50%)	2 (50%)					4.50	0.58
My interest level in each session (either online or face-to-face) was	4	2 (50%)		2 (50%)				4.00	1.15
The availability of extra help when requested was	4	2 (50%)	2 (50%)					4.50	0.58
The use of course time (either online or face-to-face) was	4	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)		1 (25%)		3.25	1.71
The instructor's interest in student learning and success was	4	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)				4.25	0.96
The amount I learned during the course was	4	2 (50%)		2 (50%)				4.00	1.15
The evaluation and grading techniques (tests, papers, projects, etc) were	4	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)				4.25	0.96
The amount and appropriateness of assigned work was	3	1 (33%)	1 (33%)			1 (33%)	1 (33%)	3.33	2.08
The clarity of my responsibilities and requirements was	4	2 (50%)		1 (25%)	1 (25%)			3.75	1.50

Additional Comments:

Overall, I learned a lot in this class about Humane Education. In the beginning, I was afraid that I was not going to get all of the work done on time. But with the help of Dr. Straub, she was there to lend a helping hand throughout the course.

The amount of work seemed overwhelming, but I think that was due to the layout with the assignments being frontloaded in the beginning. A better breakdown and explanations would have been better or lessening the number of projects to better go in-depth. Also working with a partner is difficult when we are learning remote.

This course had an extremely demanding workload for the timeframe. About 2-3 times more assignments than comparable courses. The workload was a huge source of stress that classmates talked about often. Some people dropped her for other classes in the future because of this class.

This was one of my favorite courses I have taken in my 5 years at SFA! Wonderful instructor and great course content/projects etc.