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The Humanizing Power of Narrative in Academic EFL Teaching as Response to COVID-19 Post-pandemic Education Challenges

Humanizująca siła narracji w akademickim nauczaniu EFL jako odpowiedź na wyzwania edukacyjne po pandemii COVID-19

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic enforced rapid changes in teaching methodology, practically revising the widely applied academic practices and traditional approaches. Upon entering the spaces of classrooms after demanding remote learning, academic teachers and students encounter several challenges that pertain to building humanizing learning environments, as times differ from those before the pandemic. Therefore, promoting humanizing pedagogy in higher education is critically needed right now. The purpose of the article is to detail theoretical and

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practical solutions for academic teachers to inspire them to implement a narrative approach in their academic classrooms. Empirical studies support that when humanizing pedagogy is put into practice, it can strengthen reflective and dialogic approaches to teaching English, including teaching a specialist language. The practical suggestions on how to implement these approaches into teaching EFL and ESP in the context of Polish higher education distinctively show the potential of narratives and storytelling as didactic tools translating into an opportunity to design modern, high-quality English language courses.

Keywords: EFL teaching; higher education; humanizing pedagogy; narrative approach

Abstrakt. Pandemia COVID-19 wymusiła gwałtowne, nieprzewidziane zmiany w metodyce nauczania, praktycznie rewidując powszechnie stosowane praktyki akademickie i tradycyjne podejścia. Trudy nauczania zdalnego przełożyły się na jeszcze liczniejsze kolejne wyzwania, z którymi przyszło się zmierzyć nauczycielom akademickim po powrocie, mianowicie związane z tworzeniem humanizacyjnej przestrzeni edukacyjnej. Doświadczenia wywołane kryzysem covidowym jednoznacznie pokazały, że promowanie pedagogiki humanizującej w szkolnictwie wyższym jest teraz niezwykle potrzebne. Celem artykułu jest wyszczególnienie teoretycznych i praktycznych rozwiązań mających na celu zainspirowanie nauczycieli akademickich do wdrożenia podejścia narracyjnego w swoich salach wykładowych. Badania empiryczne potwierdzają, że humanizująca pedagogika może wzmocnić refleksyjne podejście do nauczania języka angielskiego, w tym do nauczania języka specjalistycznego. Praktyczne sugestie, jak wdrożyć te podejścia w kontekście polskiego szkolnictwa wyższego, wyraźnie pokazują potencjał narracji i opowiadania historii jako narzędzi dydaktycznych, przekładając się na możliwość projektowania nowoczesnych, wysokiej jakości kursów języka angielskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie EFL; szkolnictwo wyższe; pedagogika humanizująca; podejście narracyjne

INTRODUCTION

The first two decades of the 21st century, with its unprecedented technological advancement affecting all business and social spheres of human lives, did not leave the teaching profession unchanged. With the world's strong focus on promoting and propelling digital literacy and shaping a progressive learning environment, teaching methodologies and approaches applied at higher education institutions, especially in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), have already been adjusting to meet the contemporary students' needs. However, it was March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 virus spread a pandemic, which marked a historical global milestone change not to be foreseen. Within just a few months, on account of various confinement policies adopted by countries around the world to reduce the COVID-19 spread, an estimated 1.5 billion learners (91% of all the students worldwide at the peak of the pandemic) faced compromised learning conditions (Global Education

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Coalition 2020). By the beginning of April 2020, according to the UNESCO report, 185 countries had closed their higher education institutions, shifting to various forms of remote education (Marinoni, Land, Jensen 2020). What seemed to be a temporary make-shift solution, the transition from face-to-face to online learning lasted on average 22 weeks worldwide (UNESCO 2021) and prolonged to almost two years in Poland (until June 2022) in terms of higher education schools (Ibidem). The COVID crisis enforced rapid changes in teaching methodologies, practically revising the widely applied academic practices and traditional approaches.

Considering these recently emerged challenges in higher education, this paper builds upon the work of humanizing pedagogy and thus continues to develop this framework in the academic EFL context. We explain humanizing pedagogy as a theoretical framework, discuss the narrative approach in the academic EFL classroom with some extra insight into ESP teaching, and then present some practical strategies to illustrate the power of a narrative to engage students in a more humanizing learning experience. The purpose of this conceptual article, thus, is to detail theoretical and practical solutions for academic EFL teachers to inspire them to implement a narrative approach in their academic classrooms.

ACADEMIC TEACHING PRACTICES

Teaching practices in higher education institutions encompass various methods. Traditional teaching approaches focus on a competence-based approach, in which students are tested on specific competencies they acquire during their studies (Yakovleva, Yakovlev 2014). However, such a model was challenged as early as the 1980s (Grant 1979), and some scholars consider it ineffective. For example, according to Karbalaei (2012), academic teaching practices should emphasize learning and developing analytical, critical, and conceptual abilities rather than memorization and reproduction. Thus, academic students need the space to think critically and engage in problem-solving activities to face various societal issues after graduation. In short, the academic teaching-centered model favors the teacher as a knowledge and skills transmitter responsible for designing the content, organizing classroom activities, and selecting evaluation methods. This model does not involve students in decision-making and a genuine, mutually beneficial interaction with the teacher.

On the other hand, the learning-centered model puts the student upfront by encouraging the co-construction of knowledge, cooperation with the teacher, and exchange of experiences and perspectives (Crisol-Moya, Romero-López, Caurcel-Cara 2020). Therefore, actively engaging students in learning in

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university classrooms is a more effective teaching approach, for example, by encouraging students to participate when organizing and implementing teaching and learning methodologies. Educators have proposed various examples of pedagogical strategies or techniques for active learning, including case studies, team projects, simulations, role-playing, and challenging discussions (Hativa 2000). Altay (2013) highlights that active methods promote students' analysis and reflection, contributing to students playing an active role in acquiring knowledge. Even in online education, Harasim (2017) and Wieser and Seeler (2018) view that collaborative online learning is also necessary to stimulate and guide students into working together to construct knowledge innovatively and enhance analytical and critical thinking skills. Instead of simply exchanging information, such a learning model provokes active involvement and interaction.

Finally, it was the recent COVID-19 crisis that marked significant changes in teaching practices in higher education institutions. Online education has become a mandatory solution replacing traditional face-to-face education (Marek, Polenta, Warzocha 2022). During these trying times, research studies in academic settings in Poland were conducted to survey how such a change in higher education affects teachers' work and students' learning. One study surveyed 118 academic teachers and 688 students. The survey analysis revealed that only 34% of Polish students declared that they used online education eagerly; 43% of Polish students were not able to decide whether they considered this form of education suitable for them, and 23% of Polish students reported that online education was not relevant to acquire knowledge at the academic level (Ibidem). As regards online teaching during the pandemic, the challenges that students mentioned most frequently included:

> (…) lack of direct contact with their teacher, no possibility to discuss topics in detail due to the shortage of time and direct face-to-face contact, no contact with peers, members of the same group or students at other levels to be able to ask questions, technical issues, including limited transmission capacity, poor computer equipment, variety of software used by teachers, and different platforms to be installed on private computers, and a limited possibility to consult teachers to discuss issues and deepen one's knowledge. (Ibidem: 176)

Such stressful and frustrating remote learning created serious mental and physical health strain leading to severe emotional repercussions. University students experienced anxiety, despair, feelings of loneliness, and depression (Chen, Lucock 2022; Lee, Solomon, Stead, Kwon, Ganti 2021; Tilak, Kumar 2022). Upon entering the spaces of classrooms after challenging remote learning, academic

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teachers and students encounter several challenges that pertain to building humanizing learning environments, as times differ from those before the pandemic. Online schooling felt dehumanizing for students who might have missed feeling validated for their linguistic and cultural resources and being genuinely supported to strengthen meaningful learning and deeper relationships. Strydom, Herman, Adendorff and De Klerk (2020: 39) explain that "in this time of trauma, uncertainty and change, empathy, rooted in a care perspective, opens avenues for academics and academic developers to engage with aspects that students find particularly difficult in relation". Therefore, promoting humanizing pedagogy in higher education is critically needed right now.

HUMANIZING PEDAGOGY

The original work on humanizing pedagogy can be traced back to Paulo Freire's scholarship. In 1970, this Brazilian scholar published *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, which included his argument regarding the dehumanization of education. He believed traditional teaching approaches centered on marginalizing students' voices instead of promoting critical consciousness-building. In turn, humanizing pedagogies engage students in interrogating power, privilege, and ideology in their learning process and sharing their beliefs as opposed to "teachers manipulating student narratives" (Fránquiz 2012: 39). Freire (1970) regarded humanizing pedagogy as vital to student success who partake in reflection and dialogue with the aim of transformation. He argued that education aims to develop critical consciousness through critical dialogue and reflection. In such practice, individuals move from accepting their situation to being empowered to take action and change their realities. Dialogue is a conversation that elicits critical thinking, invites sharing of experiences on oppression, and promotes humility, hope, and mutual trust. Though similar to the discussion, reflection is a meaningful, dialectic process of contemplation that leads to discovery and activism.

Following his footsteps, Bartolomé (1994: 174) continued that a humanizing pedagogy "promotes trusting relationships between teachers and students, academic consistency and learning situations where power-sharing is enabled among teachers and students". In later work, Salazar (2013) reviewed international literature on humanizing pedagogy and argued that the sociopolitical histories and current realities of education were crucial when implementing such pedagogy. She agreed with Freire (1970) and Bartolomé (1994) that teachers should involve students in active participation in knowledge co-construction "that respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice" (Salazar 2013: 173). In addition, Carter

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Andrews and Castillo (2016: 113) highlighted the significance of humanizing interactions by reminding teachers to integrate "mindsets and practices that foster learning environments where the needs of the whole student are considered, students and instructors share power, and students' background knowledge, culture, and life experiences are valued". Such practices help "students realize and enact more fully human identities". In their most recent work, after conducting a synthesized foundational literature review, Peercy et al. (2022) identified essential principles of humanizing pedagogy. When implementing humanizing pedagogy teachers,

> value students background knowledge, culture, and life experiences; promote respect, trusting relations between teachers and students, and academic rigor; focus on what students can do and achieve with the cultural and linguistic resources they bring; incorporate a student-centered approach aimed at developing critical consciousness; increase academic rigor through a focus on higher-order thinking skills; build trusting and caring relationships between teachers and students; acknowledge and capitalize on students' and parents' cultural and linguistic resources to improve teaching and learning; strengthen students' ethnic and linguistic identities; challenge the role of educational institutions and educators in maintaining inequitable systems; and advocate for innovative approaches to improve the education of all learners. (Ibidem: 3)

NARRATIVE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A humanizing pedagogy calls for reflective and dialogic learning that enriches both teachers and students. Narrative teaching stems from that viewpoint. The narrative approach involves using stories as a tool for critical reflection and dialogue. "That sense-making happens at a deeply human level given our fundamental nature" (Clark, Rossiter 2008: 1). Stories engage learners in many ways; they can improve creativity and critical thinking skills, spark vivid conversations, inspire experience sharing, and challenge practices and power dynamics.

> The telling of stories makes the learner, not the receiver but the actor, move from a cognitive understanding of an idea, principle, or concept and linking it to their own experience. The eliciting of personal stories makes what's being studied more real, more immediate, and more personal. As learners become sensitized to the narrative nature of experience, they also begin to recognize that they are both constituted by narratives and situated within multiple narratives as individuals, families, organizations, cultures, and societies. This recognition of this narrative

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> situatedness creates the possibility for critique, for the questioning of underlying assumptions, of power relations, of whose interests are served by a particular narrative, and whose interests are being exploited. (Ibidem)

Another benefit of using narratives in teaching relates to EFL students' language acquisition. This approach can improve students' communication skills as stories evoke natural responses. Also, narratives are authentic materials that serve as models for reading activities in which EFL students are exposed to natural language use. Students improve their vocabulary and learn about metaphors and other linguistic concepts (Burk 1997). In English for Specific Purposes classes, for example, narrative learning helps EFL students enhance memory and critical reasoning and promote empathy and identity development (Easton 2016; Rossiter 2002; Szurmak, Thuna 2013). Simply put, a narrative is a powerful learning tool that promotes problem-solving, creativity, and transformation (Szurmak, Thuna 2013). To this end, Zinn, Adam, Kurup, and Plessis (2016: 75) suggest that when students engage narratively, they should do the following:

> (…) identify a disorienting dilemma; examine feelings of fear, anger, guilt; critically evaluate our assumptions; recognize that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared; explore new roles, relationships, and actions; formulate a course of action; acquire knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; try on new roles; build competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and reintegrate into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's perspective.

The narrative approach has gained popularity in higher education. Case studies, poetry, critical incidents, role-playing, digital storytelling, and simulations are the story-based techniques explored in the literature (Clark, Rossiter 2008; Gehlbach et al. 2016; Pacansky-Brock 2012). For example, one way of integrating narrative learning is by giving students a voice to share their experiences through stories. Pacansky-Brock (2012) encouraged the use of the Wisdom Wall activity, in which students reflected on their experiences, identified a piece of advice for future students, and shared it on the Wisdom Wall. In addition, using media production activities promotes discussions on students' experiences, beliefs, and ideologies (Clark, Rossiter 2008). Another example of narrative learning is bringing various narratives as authentic reading materials. This is clearly illustrated by Porto and Rosas (2017), who explored human rights issues and intercultural citizenship by using the narrative technique in the English literature course. They reported that participants of the study developed empathy and

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an understanding of otherness to facilitate political engagement and personal affective interpretation of the texts.

Some studies also explored teachers and students' perspectives and experiences using narratives in the classrooms. For instance, a study in Slovenia (Fojkar, Skela, Kovac 2013) elucidated that using narratives in the foreign language classroom enhanced student language skills and motivation for all age groups. The survey among EFL teachers revealed that teachers who used narratives in their teaching, selected authentic materials, used illustrations or other visuals to support comprehension, and prepared follow-up discussion questions to engage students in reflective learning. Teachers in this study agreed that using narratives in teaching EFL was of utmost importance. In addition, another study surveyed nine pre-service teachers on their perceptions of the narrative approach in teaching. Through brainstorming, discussing, interpreting, and reflecting upon the narratives, the participants in this study gained deep-level thinking skills because they were "stimulated to look at an issue from different perspectives and share their opinions" (Goh 2019: 1740) and "critically consider the knowledge and to better understand its significance for their future teaching roles" (Ibidem: 1741).

Other studies focus on how narratives can help improve EFL students' literacy skills, including coherence and structure in written and oral production. For example, one study in Korea explored how EFL students enhanced their ability to achieve discourse cohesion in English. After using a 'frog story' picture prompts and analyzing student oral narratives, the researcher found that EFL students incorporated many linguistic devices and pragmatic techniques of narrative discourse when telling stories. However, some challenges still occurred, such as "lack of control over the formal system of English referential system, and experience in overcoming the specific discourse strategies of reference maintenance of their native language" (Kang 2004: 1988). This study indicates that narratives may serve as effective training tools to enhance linguistic and pragmatic knowledge and oral language skills to achieve discourse cohesion in extended discourse.

Yet, other studies engaged EFL students in reading and retelling the stories to improve self-expression and creativity. For example, in Babaii and Yazdanpanah's (2010) study, students presented a different and unique account of the story and thus created a dynamic and lively classroom atmosphere. The findings revealed that participants "learned how to inject their emotions, attitudes, and evaluative stance into their story and make it worthy and different from merely reporting a sequence of events occurring in the past" (Babaii, Yazdanpanah 2010: 4). Moreover, Pardo (2014) investigated the use of digital storytelling to foster the writing and speaking skills of EFL undergraduate students in Spain.

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Students worked in groups to create personal and historical narratives and present them in class. The author concluded that using narratives as a course project improved students' linguistic, artistic, technical, and creativity skills and research, writing, organization, technology, presentation, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills.

Finally, some studies investigated the use of storytelling to discuss social issues. Lugossy (2006), for instance, investigated teachers' beliefs regarding the use of narratives in the EFL classroom and found that narratives were intrinsically motivating and inspiring students to consider social issues. Thus, this study highlights that narrative use is transformative in nature. Teachers in that study reported that engaging students in reading literature in online learning fostered humanizing pedagogy by giving them tasks that exposed them to critical analysis of social issues, such as racialization and language use. O'Mochain (2009) also used narratives to discuss social problems, specifically gender and sexuality issues. He explored this topic by showing personal accounts of lesbian, gay, and transgender individuals and sparking discussions on their life experiences in the Japanese EFL college classroom. The findings of this study illuminated that having an open debate on queer issues is "challenging and unfamiliar" (Ibidem: 1) in the EFL academic classroom.

There is a consensus in the literature that using narratives as classroom activities is a powerful tool to engage students in vivid, thought-provoking, and empathy-enriching learning experiences. Empirical studies support that when humanizing pedagogy is put into practice, it can strengthen reflective and dialogic approaches to teaching EFL in academic courses.

NARRATIVE MEDICINE IN THE ESP CLASS

Applying an array of EFL teaching practices incorporating the principles of humanizing pedagogy, with its core element being mutual story-sharing and storytelling experience involving students and teachers, requires both an open-minded approach and boldness to introduce innovation, especially at an academic level. However, the power of narratives – especially in the hopefully arrived post-COVID time – has also been discerned by other disciplines, namely medicine. With its rapid hi-tech development and progress, many scholars have long addressed the problem of "dehumanized healthcare" (Haque, Waytz 2012). Unsuitable medical curricula, which either lack fundamental courses in cultural competence, public health disparities, empathy, and communication skills or just limit these to a few theoretical teaching hours, proved to be further reflected in a generation of young graduates failing to establish genuine patient-doctor

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relationships (Choudhury, Nortjé 2022). As an early answer, these arising modern quandaries came the joined power of literature and medicine merged by Rita Charon in her concept of "narrative medicine". What is now considered an independent field of medical humanities can be best understood by following Charon with her own definition of

> medicine practiced with the narrative skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness (…). Along with their scientific expertise, doctors need the expertise to listen to their patients, to understand as best as they can the ordeals of illness, to honor the meanings of their patients' narratives of illness, and to be moved by what they behold so that they can act on their patients' behalf. (Charon 2006: 3)

Charon's vision of narrative medicine and its practical implications pertain to teaching healthcare workers how to listen to their patients actively and be able to tune into their personal "medical records" by asking appropriate questions going far beyond "Could you describe your symptoms?". By offering an insight into medical narratives, which are often inspired by patients' personal records of struggling with a disease, the doctors are given a chance to reflect upon their patient-related practices and consequently re-shape them into more emphatic and truly patient-oriented. Although narrative medicine has found significant application in professional courses addressed at doctors and other healthcare workers facing burn-outs or simply seeking new methods to reconnect with their patients and improve the quality of the care they provide, its principles and theoretical framework constitute an unprecedented potential to redesign medical curricula by restoring the fundamental humane concepts, yet still to be best encompassed and reflected within a shared experience of the unique human life story. As Groopman (2022) advocates in his article for the New Yorker: "Physicians' education puts science front and center, but narrative can be a surprisingly powerful medicine" – which can also prove successful in reviving, in most cases, old-fashioned, obligatory Medical English courses attended by Polish students of Medical Faculties.

According to independent individual research conducted on the basis of widely-available data published by twelve top-ranked Medical Universities in Poland (Perspektywy 2021), their existing syllabi of Medical English courses offer primarily an intensive vocabulary training with some basic insight into professional communication realized within one hundred teaching hours. Most future medicine undergraduates in Poland may be assessed with an upper-intermediate or advanced level of English, which allows, if not requires introducing more complex and extended language content. By incorporating the principles of

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narrative medicine and thereby teaching students its techniques of text analysis and reflective writing based on authentic materials, medical English courses stand a chance to be transformed into modern multidisciplinary classes focusing on shaping emphatic attitudes, which hopefully help to restore the humane face of students' future profession. The educational goal of teaching professional vocabulary can be yet best achieved, especially with highly proficient students, by allowing them to immerse in literature and other forms of authentic language materials. A valuable source and inspiration for typical listening comprehension activities is the library of podcasts offered at https://podcasts.apple.com (Linde 2022) with an excellent Hippie Docs 2.0: Re-Humanizing Medicine series whose author and host, Dr. Paul Linde openly questions the increasing corporatization of medicine. The authentic audio material can be adapted to various forms of exercises testing students on general listening skills, such as true-false comprehension questions or listening for details in terms of vocabulary to finally conclude with intriguing speaking exercises allowing students to share their personal views on the given matter. Even more thought-provoking topics for an in-class discussion can be found within widely-accessible articles describing patients' life stories. A great example can serve the story shared by two residents working in a small community healthcare center in Harlem, New York City, which mostly serves low-income ethnic minorities (Sinha, Diacovo 2020). Being inspired by an assignment given in a course in narrative medicine during their medical school at Columbia, they conducted an art project by offering their patients in the waiting room to expressively decorate the walls to answer the question of how they see themselves. Since the article is also rich in visual content, it can be adapted to both reading and speaking language materials or even an inspiration to assign a similar project by asking students to develop their ideas for patient-oriented community-based work. Another thought-provoking idea is presented in an article describing an initiative created by a tattoo artist offering her services to women who wish to cover their scars after mastectomy (Mathias, Soni 2019). Discussing these and similar genuine life stories with medical undergraduates in their ME classes may translate into both excelling their professional foreign language skills and laying the foundations for a true patient-oriented approach. Finally, the renowned platform TED (No Putting a Shirt On 2020) annually launches events titled TEDMED, inviting inspiring speakers from around the world to share their ideas and address a myriad of medical challenges our contemporary world has to face. Dr. Charon also took a chance to participate at the TEDxAtlanta event and share her personal story, which led her to establish the narrative medicine concept as we know it today. The video material provides a hands-on insight into the field and, again, a broad source of Charon's deep

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thoughts on contemporary patient care to discuss with the students in class. It does not only allow the students to comprehend narrative medicine's general concept, but what seems even more important, actually enhance assimilating the techniques of active listening and asking the exactly precise questions, which Charon advocates for, into their future history taking clinical routines.

When narratives are made part of the processes of learning and teaching, it provides an effective way to promote "responsibility for self-growth" and "can be a powerful mechanism for transformation, learning and interpretation of personal experience" (Juškevičienė, Nedzinskaitė 2013: 18). Incorporating narrative teaching approaches proves to be a universal didactic tool, which can be easily adapted to any academic classroom. Hence, the advanced future EMP courses (English for Medical Purposes) should also aim at encompassing multidisciplinary skills and humane values delivered in the English language, which, in order to appear genuine and attractive for the students, must reflect upon an authentic narrative with authentic characters, being often both, patients and doctors.

CONCLUSIONS

After the historic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, not only must the world economy but, most importantly, education and human relations face an unforeseen recovery. This conceptual article's theoretical framework of humanizing pedagogy initiated by Freire and the concept of narrative medicine by Charon correspond precisely with the urgent demand of academic students to restore and provide a new quality of human relations in higher education, especially after the pandemic. The practical suggestions on how to implement these approaches into teaching EFL and ESP in the context of Polish higher education distinctively show the potential of narratives and storytelling as didactic tools translating into an opportunity to design modern, high-quality English language courses. The COVID crisis has written a myriad of unique human narratives, which, when handled with humanizing power, can be translated into values of mutual solidarity and trust reaching far beyond any academic curriculum.

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