

# Seeing What Grows

## Humanizing approaches to virtual learning

Co-authored by Sahibzada Mayed, Alexis Papak, Sarita Garcia, Natalie Melo, Hyoheé Kim and Gerald Daye Jr., in collaboration with the Vossoughi Research Lab



# Learning About Learning During a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically impacted how teaching and learning are being imagined and carried out. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen calls for a return to in-person learning without adequate safety plans or the resources and policies needed to ensure the safety of young people, their families and elders, and their communities.

Efforts to ease restrictions on in-person learning are based in part on narrow discourses of “learning loss” as well as the limitations of remote learning. While virtual learning has its challenges, it has also been hindered by pressures to engage in conventional forms of content delivery online rather than to prioritize social relationships and meaningful dialogue in ways that support the kinds of intellectual and relational nourishment young people need.

While safe, in-person learning has clear benefits, moments of disruption as well as ongoing forms of distance-learning require a more imaginative and dynamic view of digital learning. This includes the power of emphasizing the “how” of learning – the pedagogical designs, participation structures and ways of being together that support generative learning environments.

This zine draws from our work in a STEAM based out of school program that was moved online during the summer of 2020 to explore these questions and possibilities.

Take a moment to reflect: how have your own experiences with learning (or the experiences of people in your life) changed during the pandemic? When has your learning felt most meaningful? What made it meaningful?



# Making Together While We are Apart

The STEAM-based summer program featured in this zine typically takes place in-person at local makerspaces serving Black and Latinx middle school youth. Due to the pandemic, the program pivoted to serve students online during Summer of 2020.

Part of this transition involved a focus on learning to create and tell digital stories. Throughout the program, young people and mentors creatively explored what storytelling and self-expression mean by producing artistic media such as memes, zines and other creations. The program intentionally prioritized relationships and supported young people to critically reflect on and draw from their personal histories and lived experiences.

Though the summer STEAM program was virtual and the students and mentors never met in person, the program built an ethos of shared storytelling and togetherness that was powerfully sustained throughout the summer. Mentors in the program were all young educators of color (Black, Latinx and Asian American) who either worked in the makerspace or were students at the local university.



# Two Streams of Possibility

While activity design is central to meaningful learning, equally important are the ways educators pedagogically support and mediate activities. In this zine, we want to show how the small ways educators mediated students' thinking and engagement supported the telling of powerful stories and the creation of a unique learning experience in a virtual environment.

We invite you to walk with us as we trace two streams of development and consider what they opened up. First, we look at how mentors prioritized and supported the collective building of relationships and family as central to learning. Next, we share how mentors and students challenged the ways power usually plays out both in remote learning spaces like zoom and in classrooms more broadly.



# Prioritizing Social and Familial Relations as a Goal of Learning

One of the ways the program worked to foster a powerful digital learning space was by prioritizing not just learning to engage in various practices (for example, how to craft and share stories) but also prioritizing learning about each other and building deep, collective social relationships.

This is different from how learning is typically organized to emphasize disciplinary practices, with social relations become either an afterthought (kids should also make friends, but they're here to learn science) or a means to disciplinary ends (if students get to know each other, they can become better collaborators in class).

In the STEAM summer program, building social and familial relations was centered in every activity as an important and central goal of learning.

## How did we support this goal? .doc

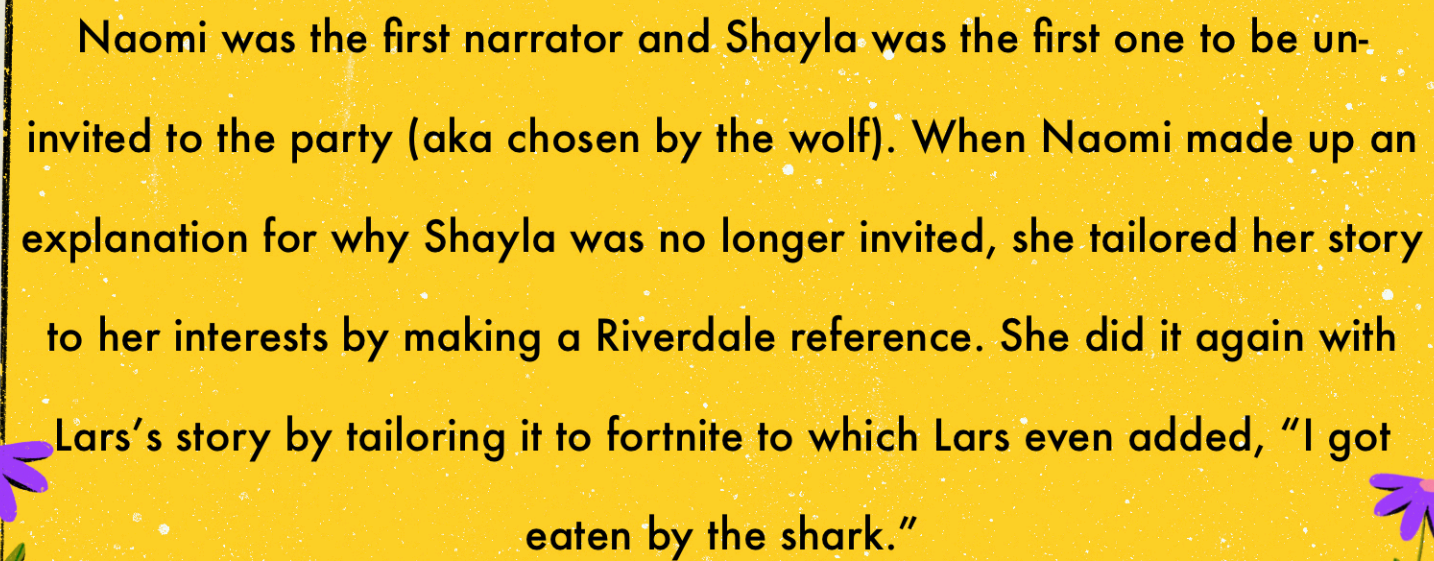
- Showing students their interests and questions matter to the space
- Supporting students in bringing parts of themselves to the collective, and mentors modeling what it can look like to share our stories and experiences
- Moving at the pace of trust and community building (Adrienne Maree Brown). In other words: not rushing to get through every activity, but moving at the pace that community and relationships require.
- Recognizing the ways intellectual activity and relationship building are deeply intertwined

What are some other ways to support building community and family as a goal of learning? How do you create opportunities and open pathways for dreaming and transformation?

# Showing Young People That Who They Are Matters

While the activities we led engaged makers in digital storytelling, the particular ways they were structured supported the ongoing development of community and family.

One way we did this was by showing young people that their interests, identities and ideas mattered and could be explicitly brought into our storytelling activities. Let's look at one example when Naomi facilitated a game of Werewolf with students Shayla and Lars:



Naomi was the first narrator and Shayla was the first one to be uninvited to the party (aka chosen by the wolf). When Naomi made up an explanation for why Shayla was no longer invited, she tailored her story to her interests by making a Riverdale reference. She did it again with Lars's story by tailoring it to fortnite to which Lars even added, "I got eaten by the shark."

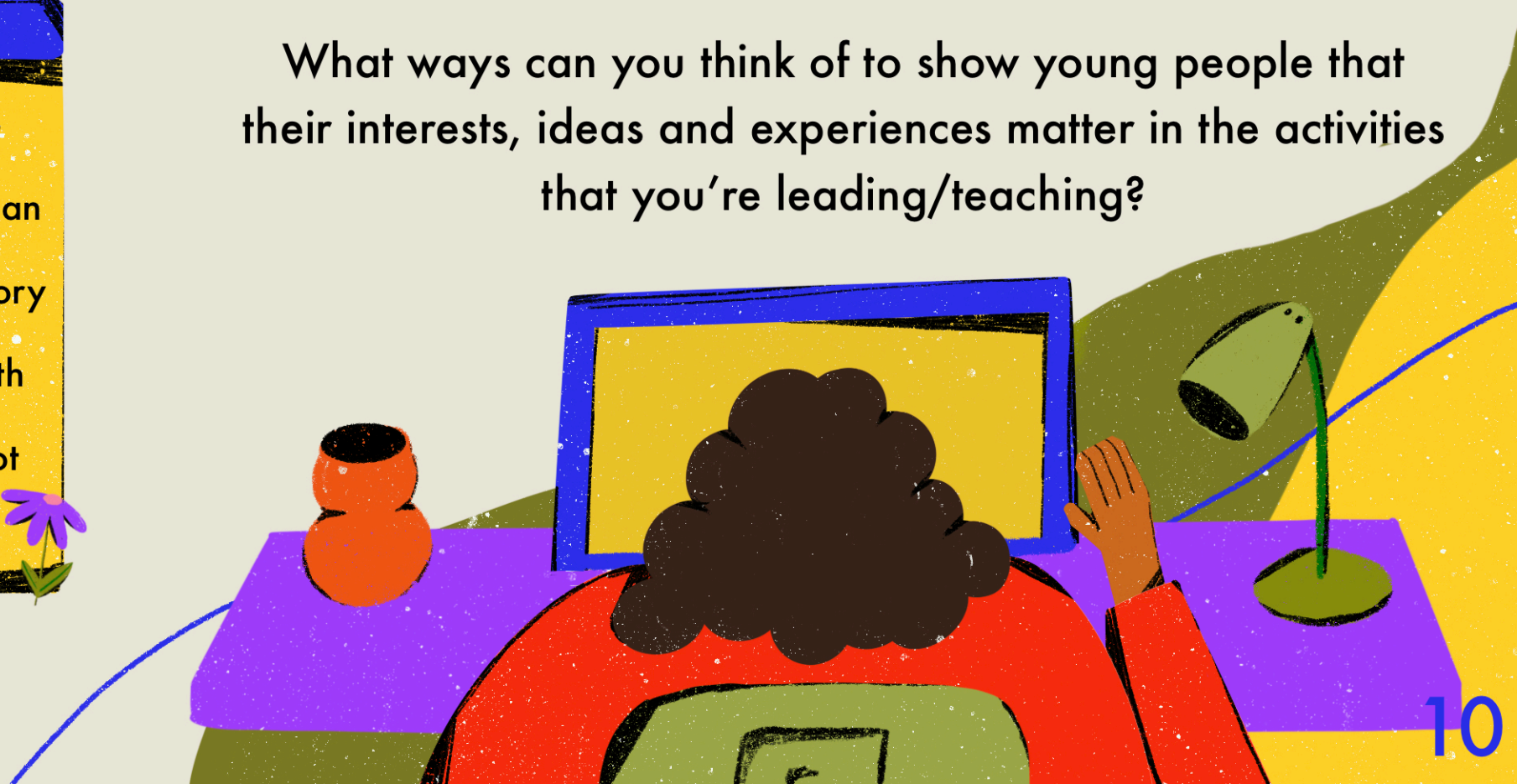
\*Names used throughout this zine are pseudonyms

In this example, Naomi used the structure of werewolf as an opportunity to recognize and bring in students' passions. The "story" of werewolf usually consists of everyone being "villagers" and one villager secretly being a werewolf and choosing another villager to eliminate every round. Instead, Naomi made up a different kind of story to intentionally show Shayla and Lars that their interests and passions mattered.

In doing so, she created a space where helping young people be seen and known was part of the practice of storytelling, an orientation to storytelling that continued throughout the program.

It's important that this wasn't a one-off instance of a mentor referencing students interests, but part of a wider practice of supporting young people in bringing in parts of themselves by showing them that their interests matter both to mentors and to the activities they are engaging in.

What ways can you think of to show young people that their interests, ideas and experiences matter in the activities that you're leading/teaching?



# Supporting Young People in Bringing in Parts of Themselves

Mentors also actively scaffolded activities so that sharing about oneself became a part of activities they were already engaging in. For example, mentors introduced a game called hot seat as a way for students to get to know each other.

Hot seat is a game when one person is in the “hot seat” and everyone else gets to ask a question to try to get to know them better. As a game, hot seat had a lot of possibility as a way for students to learn about each other and reflect on that learning in unique ways. However, it could also easily go wrong (e.g. students feeling put on the spot). A lot of the success of hot seat as an activity had to do with how careful and intentional pedagogy shaped the experience.

Instead of starting by having students ask questions about each other, the game started with having everyone use a random person/actor generator to pick a person and the group could collectively ask 5 questions to try to determine who the person was. This helped lower the stakes of entry by making the game initially about trying to ask questions about a famous or fictional person.

Additionally, Naomi supported students to deepen and reflect on the kinds of questions they were asking by wondering aloud: “what’s a way to really get to know Gary in only five questions?”

It’s also important to mention that this activity only felt like it was possible because it was drawing on existing ways students were already building relationships and community with each other.

Further, Gary (a mentor) offered to begin on the “hot seat.” He recommended utilizing the same word generator for those working to figure out their questions, since the generator had a “get to know you” category with different kinds of questions/prompts generated. Each person asked Gary a question to get to know him – some about his favorite food, others about clothes or what he liked to do.

In summer 2021, the STEAM program had a focus on honoring our ancestors. In a similar activity, students interviewed one another while embodying an ancestor of their choosing (from their family or wider community) and created a pod cast out of the recordings of their conversations.

**What other ways do you see mentors supporting students’ thinking and engagement in these examples?**

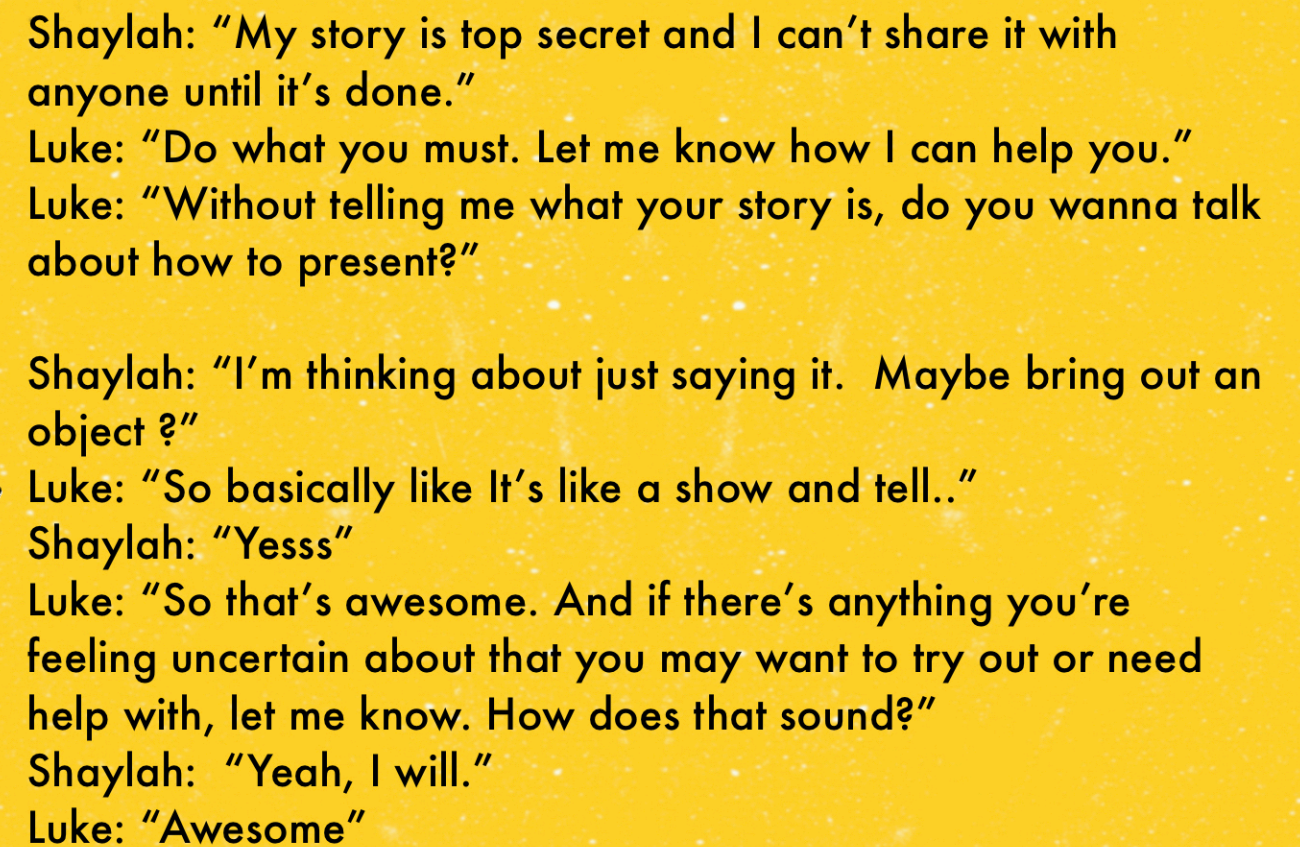


# Moving at the Pace of Trust

One of our participants, Lars, frequently engaged with his camera off. Rather than pressure him to turn the camera on the group trusted that he could engage without it and made efforts to fully include him in all the activities. Lars frequently engaged in the chat, with his voice, and through sharing images in ways that allowed him to participate meaningfully, on his own terms.

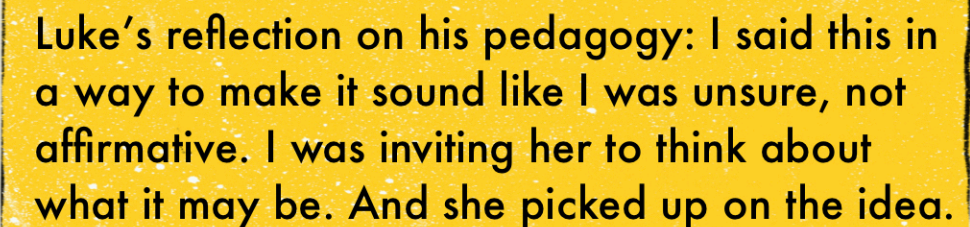
The relationships that formed facilitated ways of being together and with each other that were pedagogically generative. One example of this was when we saw Shayla and Luke engaging in a storytelling activity together. The prompt was tangible storytelling and invited participants to engage in multimodal forms of interaction to express their stories. Luke was supporting Shayla to reflect on what she might be interested in sharing with the group and why it was meaningful for her. As they started working on it, Shayla said: "My story is top-secret and I can't share it with anyone until it's done." Luke responded: "Without telling me what your story is, do you wanna talk about how you might present it?"

## What do you notice in the interaction below?



Shaylah: "My story is top secret and I can't share it with anyone until it's done."  
Luke: "Do what you must. Let me know how I can help you."  
Luke: "Without telling me what your story is, do you wanna talk about how to present?"

Shaylah: "I'm thinking about just saying it. Maybe bring out an object?"  
Luke: "So basically like It's like a show and tell.."  
Shaylah: "Yesss"  
Luke: "So that's awesome. And if there's anything you're feeling uncertain about that you may want to try out or need help with, let me know. How does that sound?"  
Shaylah: "Yeah, I will."  
Luke: "Awesome"



Luke's reflection on his pedagogy: I said this in a way to make it sound like I was unsure, not affirmative. I was inviting her to think about what it may be. And she picked up on the idea.



# Disrupting Power and Transforming Hierarchies

We want to shift now to a second stream of development: how young people and mentors in the space challenged some of the ways power usually plays out in virtual (and in-person) learning spaces.



As a starting point, we want to begin by thinking about how the idea of rules played out in the design of learning.

# Which rules?

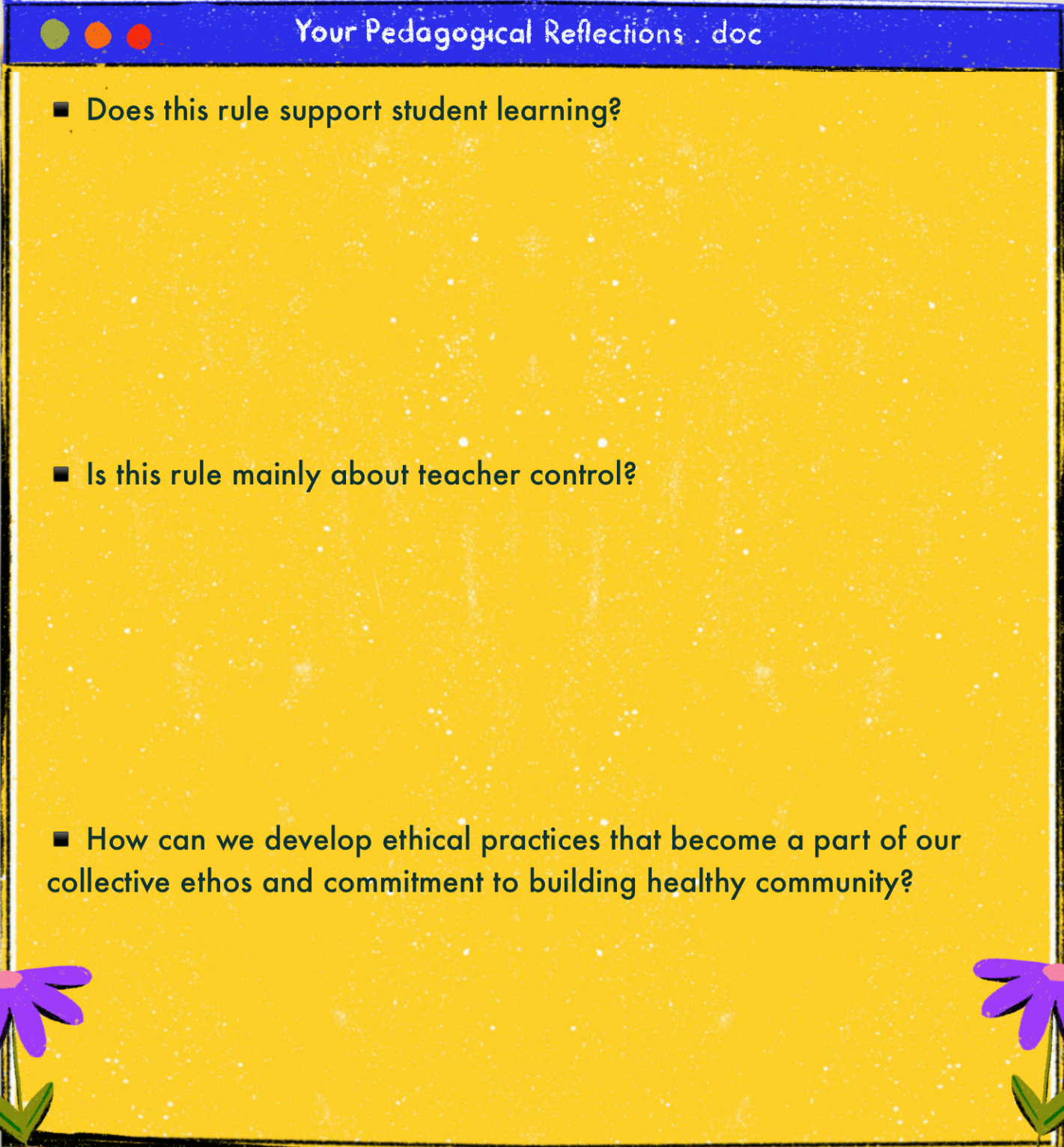
While remote learning seems more constrained and hierarchical, there are opportunities to disrupt some of the hierarchy built into platforms such as Zoom.

One generative space where this kind of disrupting occurred was in our decision to not require people to mute themselves when they weren't talking or to require students' videos to be on.

This decision came out of the tension between wanting to support learning and participation and not wanting to enforce rigid rules or engage in punitive practices. We found that rules like "keep your video on" or "keep yourself muted unless you're called on" are assumed to be helpful for seeing everyone's faces or making sure the person speaking can be heard, but in reality center the control of teachers rather than supporting students and building intergenerational community.

Instead, we worked together to develop a more collective practice of moving between intentionally muting ourselves to make sure others could be heard, and trusting people to engage in multi-party talk and listening.

Questions to ask of the pedagogical rules in your learning environment:



Your Pedagogical Reflections . doc

- Does this rule support student learning?
- Is this rule mainly about teacher control?
- How can we develop ethical practices that become a part of our collective ethos and commitment to building healthy community?

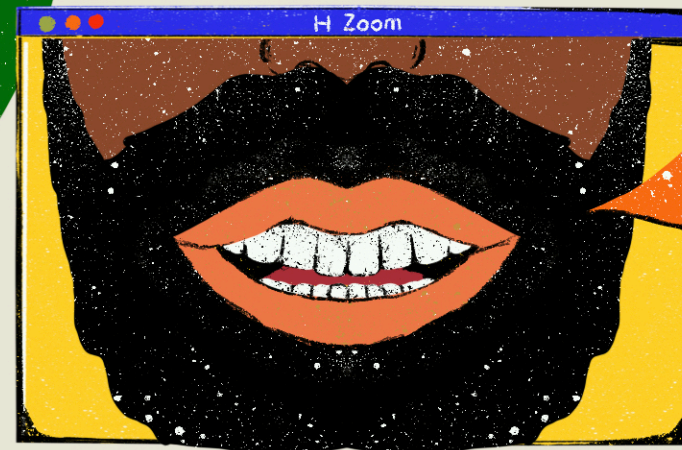
# Messing with Muting

Our practice of intentional muting wasn't something that was natural to the zoom learning environment. It was something that emerged as we supported students in thinking about and reflecting on the constraints of zoom—specifically around how it constrained our ability to hear others.

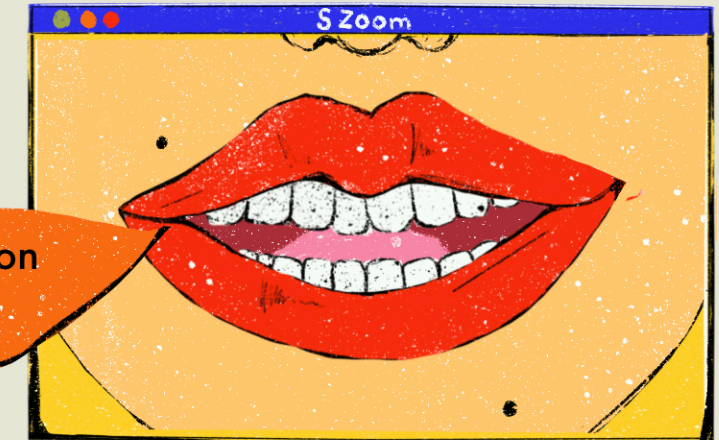
For example, early in the program, we played a muting game. In this game, everyone chose a word and repeated it until the host muted somebody. The goal of the game was to continue repeating your word while also listening for everyone else's and seeing if you can guess who was muted.

What felt especially generative wasn't the game itself, but how mentors used the game as an opportunity to support students in thinking about what it takes for someone to be heard over zoom (a pattern across many of the games we played)

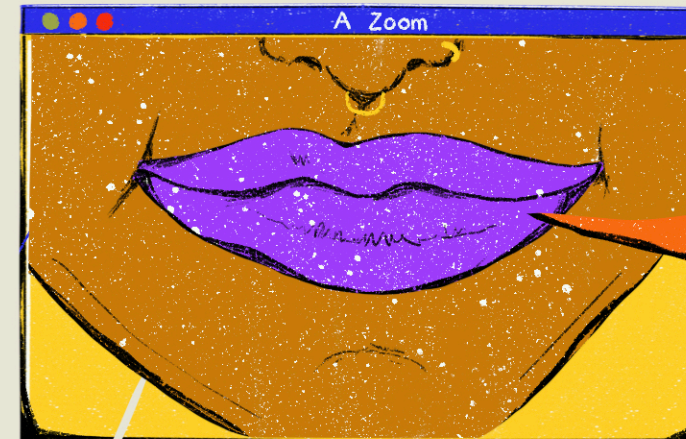
Throughout the game, mentors prompted students to think about what conditions are necessary to listen and really hear others over zoom. By prompting students with statements such as "you gotta focus on a certain person," mentors helped students focus in on the things that might be important to know if they wanted to hear people and not talk over others.



This is a hard game !

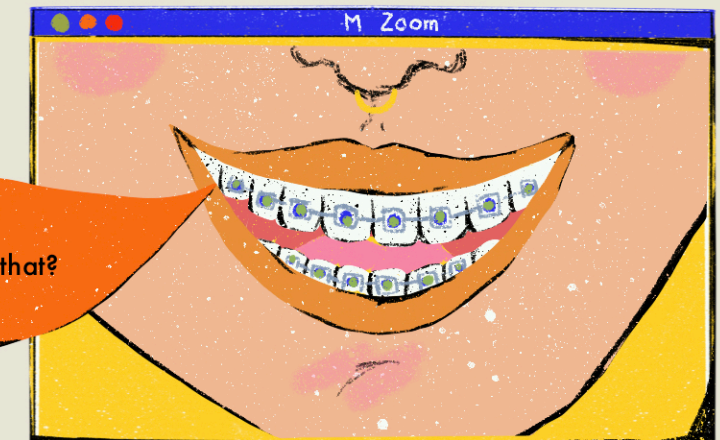


You gotta listen to people..you gotta focus in on a certain person



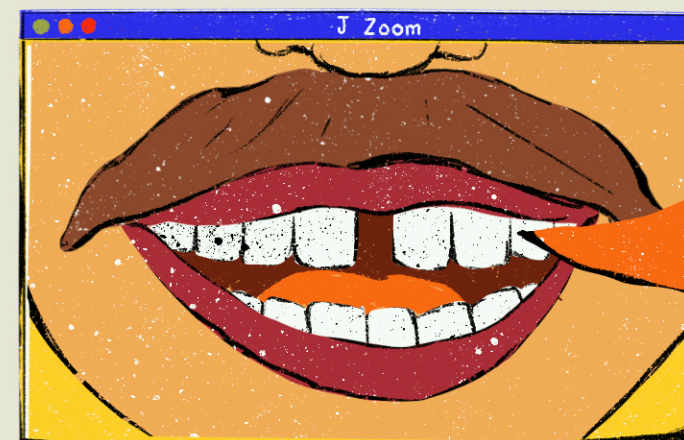
It really is.

You have to be able to listen to what everyone is saying.



Sometimes when we talk we have a lot of background noise.

Oh I think I heard you say something. Could you repeat that?



Listen in.

It's difficult to hear when all of us are talking at the same time.

Respect everybody's space while we're talking

# Not Your Usual Expertise

In addition to disrupting the forms of hierarchy built into zoom, we saw practices that disrupted how power normally plays out in schools. This happened when both mentors and students expanded what it means to be an “expert” in a learning space. For example, while playing werewolf, H—a mentor in the space—was selected to be the narrator for the first time (a role that involves facilitating the game by making-up and telling the story). As H started introducing the story, they quickly ran into some difficulty:

H chose to become the narrator. They asked:

H: Does everyone feel good about not making it to the party?

Shayla: What if we're all at the tea party and he gave one of us poison ....I was thinking of a movie.

H: Well then, pick your poison...You know what I'll just freestyle it. As the night fell.....'

[H paused here a bit.]

Shayla: The struggle is real.

H: They all went to bed... you know what I'm gonna do this like..... Oh man this is tougher than I imagined. I just can't think of like a story

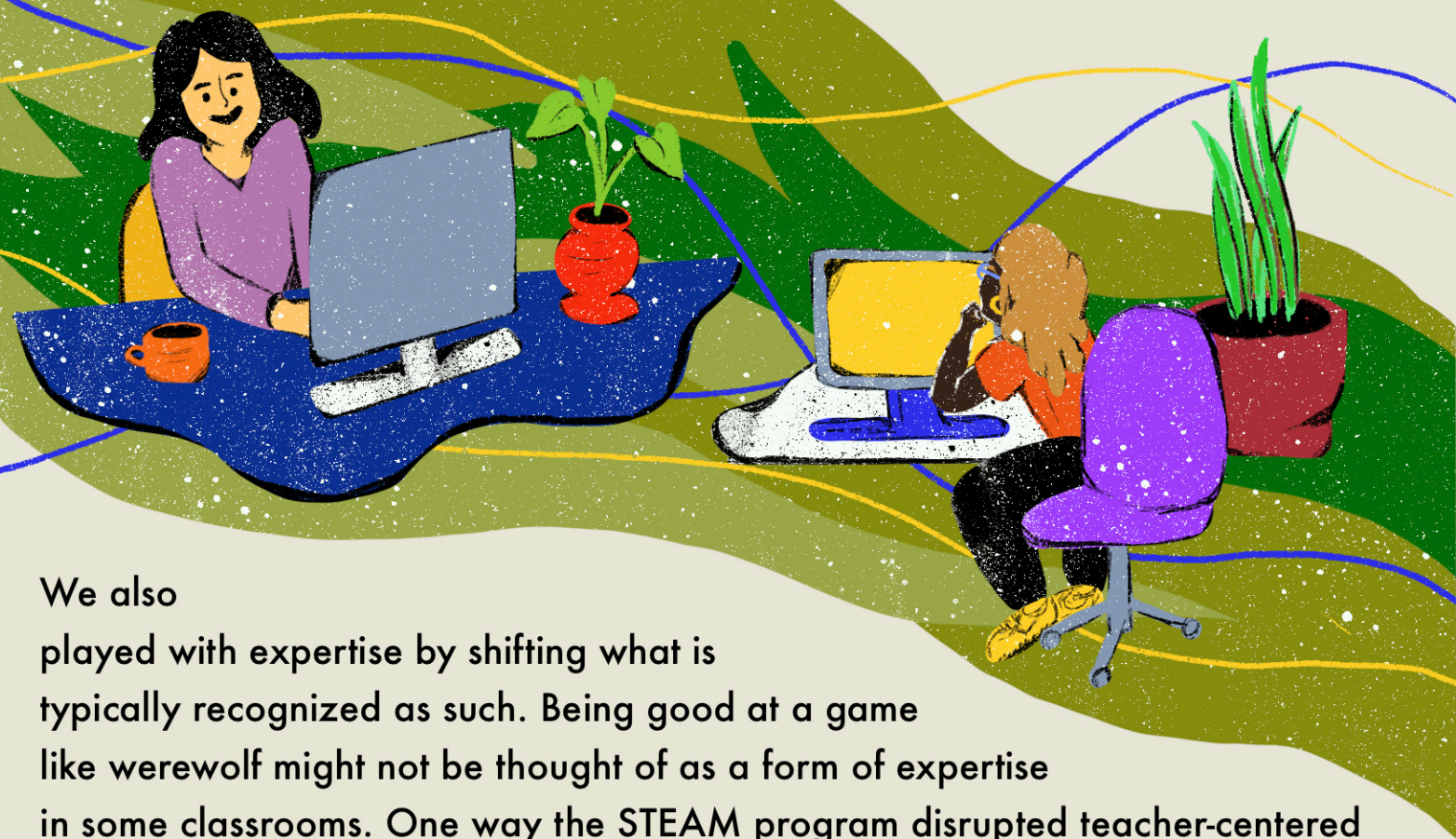
In this excerpt, the script between who's normally thought of as an expert and novice in the learning space flipped: H initially had trouble deciding what kind of story they wanted to tell as the narrator, and Shayla recognized their difficulty and supported them by offering a potential suggestion of her own and (as a seasoned narrator herself) by acknowledging out loud that being the narrator is difficult.

While the interaction was initiated by Shayla, it was also something that H was pedagogically supporting.

How do you see H supporting Shayla in being an expert?



In the previous excerpt, one way H supported Shayla's expertise was by allowing themselves to be seen as not an expert, making their own struggles visible. By doing so, H disrupted the often-unchallenged assumption in learning spaces that mentors/teachers are experts and students are novices, opening space for Shayla to jump in. After finishing narrating, H even reflected outloud: "I think I'm someone who likes to prepare before something happens...my mind is blank. I was literally frozen...Oh man trying to make up a whole story...It was tough like being on the spot." Such moments of vulnerability can create space for students to share their own struggles and vulnerabilities as an important part of learning and shared community.



We also played with expertise by shifting what is typically recognized as such. Being good at a game like werewolf might not be thought of as a form of expertise in some classrooms. One way the STEAM program disrupted teacher-centered forms of expertise was by valuing student interests and practices as valued forms of knowledge in the space. This means connecting activities with students' interests and designing learning so that students can try out new things and expand their interests over time. Being seen and valued for who we are and creating space for ongoing becoming and learning are key characteristics of generative learning environments.

## How do you see expertise being constructed in the three excerpts below?

Response doc

As students trickled in one by one, Gary asked "So we're playing Roblox on Friday?" Levell responded, "I mean, yes if you guys can keep up." Naomi added, "I don't know if I can keep up but imma play anyways."

Response doc

Shayla asked if we could play the werewolf game again. Shayla: "I'm just not gonna be the narrator." Gary didn't know what we were talking about since he was absent the last time. Shayla commented: "Oh right you're a newbie."

Response doc

All of a sudden, we notice Gary's background change... to a newly made meme of Levell! "When fortnite is life", the meme captioned. We all laughed. 'I'm gonna end your career', Levell said. 'Can I retire now?' Gary joked. 'It's too late for that', Levell responded.

# Seeing the Seeds of Our Relationships Grow

By focusing on intentional relationship-building, the summer program opened multiple pathways to develop meaningful connections. These bonds also strengthened over time.

A powerful example of family relations being salient to students was when local high school students who were part of an anti-racist organization were visiting. We asked everyone to reflect on how they would represent the program to someone new. Shayla responded with: "[The program] is a family." Lars and Levell expressed similar sentiments.

We see these as some of the fruits that grow from the relational conditions nourished over time in the space.

I asked the group how we felt about the high school students visiting us the next day. Luke added, that we should anticipate some questions they may have for us. He asked us to think about what we are and what we do. Shayla responded, "[The program] is a family."

Luke: 'If I asked you to present this on Friday, how would you feel about it?'

Lars: 'I would feel nervous saying it to someone'

Luke: 'That's perfectly valid. We can definitely think of some ways to work around that... How would you feel about sharing this story with the group?'

Lars: 'Not as nervous, but still a bit nervous'

Mayed: 'What changed?'

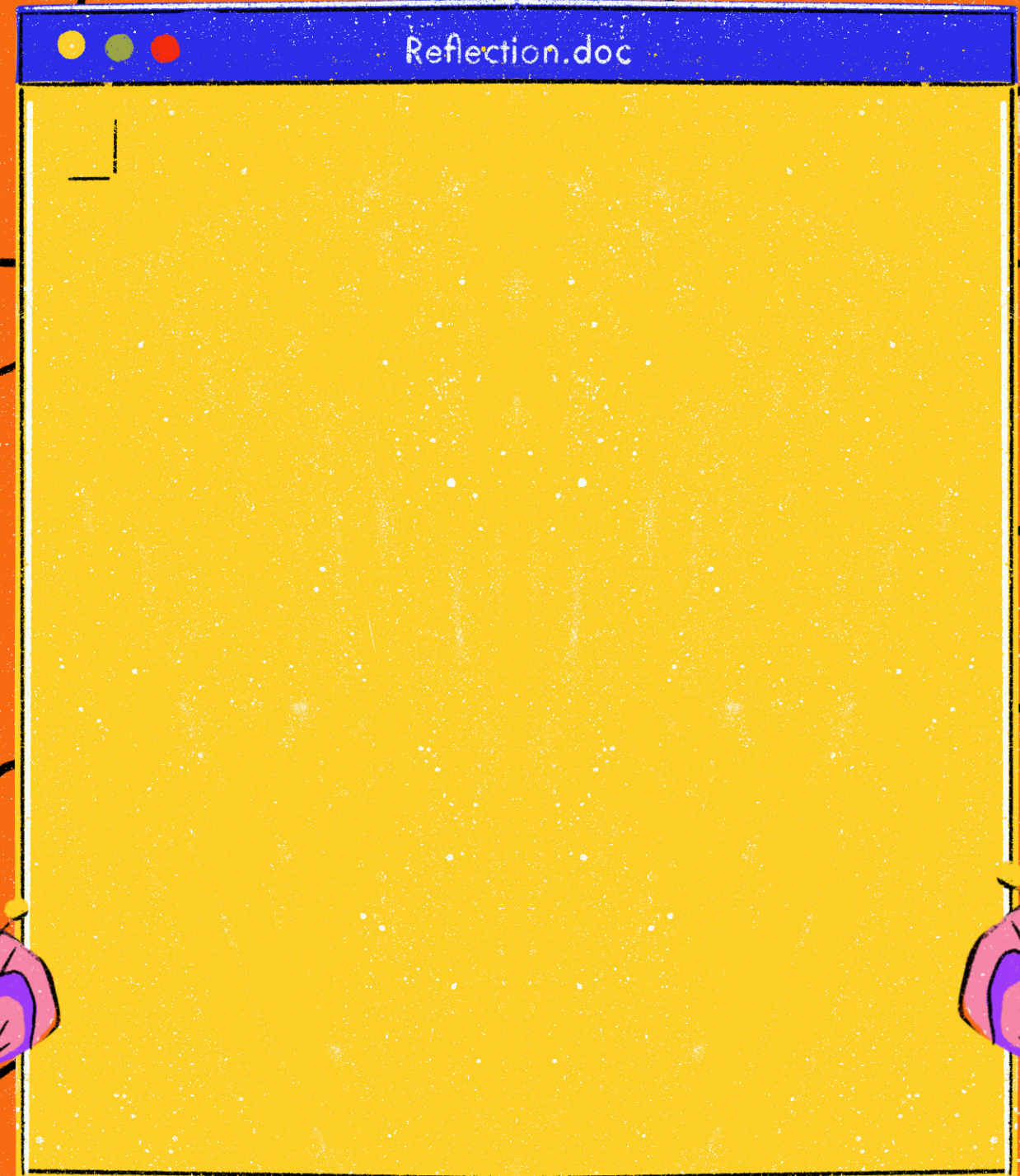
Lars: 'You guys are like sort of friends...we play games and everything'

A mentor asked: How'd you feel about today?

Levell: "Good, funny, having a good time. I felt that you people understand me."

# Questions for Reflection

- Reflect on a time in an educational space where someone saw your full humanity. What do you think made this possible?
- Reflect on a time you were part of a space where you felt heard or unheard. What did you notice about the practices within that setting? How did that make you feel?
- What does it mean to bring your whole self to an educational space? Consider moments when you felt like you really connected with students, or students were really connecting with each other. How were these moments supported by mentors and other students?
- When and how does virtual learning feel constraining? When does it feel like it may open new possibilities?
- What are some ideas you might want to carry forward or try based on the examples in the zine? How can we create more humanizing and generative spaces for digital learning?



Some examples shared in this zine were drawn from a project supported through NSF Award # 1838916