


Chapter 1

Humanizing the Online Classroom: Lessons From the Pandemic Crisis


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ABSTRACT

The global calamity of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift from face-to-face learning to online learning ushering in pedagogical experimentation and innovation. This chapter advocates for the importance of a humanizing approach to the online classroom. Humanizing is conceptualized as a pedagogical orientation and practice in which person-to-person connections and the relational qualities of teaching and learning are intentionally prioritized. Four areas are discussed: 1) the adoption of new practices for the creation of authentic learning experiences, 2) the development of humanizing approaches for the assessment of student learning, 3) the recognition of student mental wellness as a humanizing practice, and 4) the leverage of educational frameworks to build connection. The aim is to expand the conversation regarding the opportunities and challenges for humanizing online learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether by choice or by necessity, most college faculty have now had experience with online education. For many, their initial pandemic instructional experiences could be characterized as emergency remote teaching, a pedagogical approach that is antithetical to high-quality online learning. As Dean and Director of Online Programs at the University of Kentucky, Jay Miller (2022), puts it, “There is a difference between educating online and online education” (n.p.). Although the experiences of remote learning during the pandemic were variable, the shift to online education brought with it new insights, supporting continued innovation and expansion of the online classroom (Villasenor, 2022). Even learning activities that were typically conducted in person have become hybrid (Lempres, 2022). Changing and growing in new ways, what is the role of online education in higher education in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis?

An important direction for online education pertains to the relational aspects of teaching and learning. That is the human-to-human connections that occur between teachers and students, and students and students, that solidify learning and help form lasting memories of the classroom experience. We call these interactional processes “humanizing the classroom,” and consider them essential aspects of high-quality online pedagogy.

Felton and Lambert (2020) underscore the power of human relationships in higher education pedagogy. Interactions between students and instructors “positively influence learning, retention, and graduation rates, [and contribute to] critical thinking, identity development, communication skills, and leadership abilities” (p. 5). Indeed, human relationships are not only “the beating heart of higher education,” but “learning and well-being are intimately, inseparably connected” (Felton & Lambert, 2020, p. 163). In the shift to remote learning necessitated by the pandemic, “being a human” has been a rallying cry for faculty who sought to interact meaningfully with students. These faculty sought to realize Felton and Lambert’s (2020) pandemic-inspired exhortation that “no matter the future, let’s challenge ourselves to make relationship-rich education a reality for all of our students” (p. 165).

There may be unique challenges to achieving relationship-rich education in the online context. Online teaching occurs in a digital space that circumscribes the kinds of interactions that may be available. It is important to recognize that our efforts toward humanizing the online classroom are always situated within the particular material conditions and social circumstances of both instructors and students. Internet connections, bandwidth, equipment capabilities, software, platforms, and so on constitute material resources that may be unevenly available to students and faculty. Along with its materiality, the online classroom is a space for the person-to-person intersubjective experiences of teachers and learners. It is shaped by intellectual, emotional, and psychological human capacities that express, build, and sustain relationships and connections. Given the material and social features of online modalities, how can faculty humanize the online classroom?

CHAPTER PREVIEW

A worthwhile facet of the post-pandemic is the perspective that allows faculty to appraise their experiences with online learning to inform teaching and learning practices going forward. In this chapter, four college professors respond to Felton and Lambert’s (2020) challenge by exploring the questions: How can faculty humanize the online classroom? What does that look like in practice? We are full-time and part-time faculty in all career stages (early-, mid-, late-career), teaching undergraduate and graduate

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