Reviewing Your Course for the Human Touch: A Self-Reflection Exercise

Many instructors lament the lack of personal, human connections in their online courses. In face-to-face meetings, we often banter before and after class about seemingly insignificant topics like sports, music, or food. Yet these interactions are not insignificant. Sharing a physical space affords all sorts of pedagogical benefits, from forming personal relationships with students to determining how well material is going over by assessing the expressions on students' faces before us. When we teach online, these physical encounters are often not possible.

But that does not mean that a human touch is not possible online. Indeed, connecting with students is just as important in an online setting, if not moreso, when many conventional paths for monitoring progress are not easily accessible. This document has two objectives: first, to offer an overview of "humanizing" online courses, including a few best practices and resources; second, to provide a set of questions instructors can ask themselves as they prepare and deliver online courses. While specific courses and goals may render certain parts of this document more relevant to some instructors than others, the fundamental goal—ensuring our online courses have a human touch—remains the same.

Part 1. What is a Humanized Course, and Why Does it Matter?

A humanized course is one that emphasizes the human and personal side of the learning experience in addition to its content. The goal in humanizing is to deliberately insert human and personal touches in both the design and administration of a course. Humanizing conceptualizes college courses as shared community experiences rather than simply transactions between students and content experts. The benefits of this approach are substantial: students in courses that place a premium on the human touch tend to be more motivated to work, more satisfied with their learning, more successful in meeting course goals, and more likely to continue their education (e.g., Baker 2010; Bawa 2016; Fike and Fike 2008; Glazier 2016; Richardson and Swan 2003; Shaw, Burrus, Ferguson, 2016).

Humanized learning tends to focus on three core attributes:[1]

- **Awareness:** instructors should know their students beyond the summary information contained in class rosters so they can better understand individuals' needs and goals in the course
    - Some examples of awareness in an online course:
        - Survey your students at the beginning of the term to ascertain their familiarity with and interest in the course material; even asking how enthusiastic they are about the upcoming course can help you identify early individuals who may need extra attention
        - Offer frequent, formative, low-stakes activities throughout the course that provide students an opportunity to share how things are going from their

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[1] For a helpful infographic on humanizing online courses by Michelle Pacansky-Brock, one of the leaders in and advocates for this dimension of teaching, click here.

perspective (e.g., optional weekly diaries that invite students to comment both on their course progress and life in general)
- Consider deliberately adjusting course content (e.g., emphasizing or de-emphasizing particular course components) after consulting students goals/interests, and communicate why you are doing so

- **Presence:** instructors should be seen and available, even in primarily asynchronous courses, so students recognize you as a "real person" who is accessible to support their learning
  - Some examples of presence in an online course:
    - Share a bit about yourself with students in an introductory video
    - Develop weekly videos commenting on current events and upcoming course content that is unique for each course you teach
    - Commit to reasonably short response times to student inquiries
    - Proactively check in with students individually at the beginning of the course, and periodically thereafter; ask what you can do to support their learning rather than simply respond to inquiries generated by students
    - Engage with students in online coursework like discussion boards, rather than simply grading their contributions
    - Offer to meet students synchronously online, either for individual consultations or group gatherings
    - Provide individualized feedback on assignments that combines praise for strengths in the works and suggestions for future improvement

- **Empathy:** instructors should communicate their interest in supporting students facing different challenges and needs
  - Some examples of empathy in an online course:
    - Share your own constraints, such as familial obligations that prevent you from being online at particular hours, and remind students that you understand there is more to their lives than any one course
    - Invite students to share circumstances that may impact their ability to complete coursework, and make accommodations as necessary and appropriate to build around them as much as possible
    - Follow-up with students who appear to be struggling with personal messages of support and invitations to connect and review course challenges
    - Offer *synchronous* opportunities for students to communicate with you, even in courses that do not have mandatory synchronous components
    - Use a conversational, informal tone as possible and necessary to ease anxiety, particularly in one-on-one settings

Part 2: Assessing the Human Touch in Your Course

How do instructors know if they have put a sufficient human touch in their online course? There is no universal standard, of course, so the answer to this question will vary by instructor and perhaps even by course. Factors like class size can have a considerable impact on the nature of your humanization efforts. Rather than prescribe a rigid series of steps to humanizing your course, this document instead provides a series of questions to help you reflect on how you design and administer online courses. Not every question will apply to every individual, nor do actionable steps that apply to one person necessary apply another. The key is to take time before, during, and after a course to reflect on the human element of teaching, not simply the content.

Pre-Course Reflection

1) What steps can I take to better know this group of students as our course gets underway?

2) What information might I share about myself and my teaching environment that would help students appreciate my teaching approach and personality?

3) How often will students see my face and hear my voice?
   a. Is this frequency providing enough digital face time for course and student needs?

4) How will I know if students are comfortable with (a) the course material and (b) the course set-up (LMS page, policies, submission procedures, etc.)?

5) Have I provided adequate instructions for students who wish to set up an online conference with me?

6) What technological or logistical limitations may apply to students in this course, and what are reasonable accommodations I make to address them?

7) Are course requirements and policies sufficiently flexible to accommodate unforeseen disruptions to the course?

Mid-Course Reflection

1) Have I communicated individually with every student in the course at least once?

2) How can I determine which students are struggling with the course material?

3) What is my intervention strategy to support students who may be falling behind (e.g., not turning in work, performing poorly on assignments)?

End-of-Course Reflection

1) What evidence would help me assess the efficacy of my humanization strategies this term?

2) What approaches seemed to work this term that I plan to keep for future courses?

3) What approaches seemed to not work this term? Why not?

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