Shaping the Futures of Learning in the Digital Age

Humanizing Online Teaching to Equitize Higher Education

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Abstract: Online courses are increasing access to college for students who have been traditionally left out of higher education. However, minoritized students are less likely to succeed online when compared to their White and Asian peers. As the student population becomes more diverse, colleges and universities have an opportunity to improve this problem by preparing faculty to design and facilitate inclusive online learning experiences that more effectively support the needs of all learners. This paper presents a model for humanized online teaching using a theoretical framework influenced by Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), social presence, validation theory, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Humanized online teaching ensures the non-cognitive components of learning are addressed through instructor-student relationships and community, allowing connection and empathy to drive engagement and rigor. Six humanizing strategies with real teaching examples are discussed, in addition to goals for meaningful professional development to support the adoption of humanized online teaching.

Introduction

Online courses are playing a more critical role in higher education, as they continue to provide access to low-income students who do not have the privilege of being on campus full-time. However, students from minoritized groups are less likely to succeed in online courses. "Humanizing" is a pedagogical strategy that seeks to improve equity gaps by acknowledging the fact that learning environments are not neutral; rather, they often operate to reinforce a worldview that minoritizes some students. The assumption that student engagement and academic achievement are inherent student attributes is deeply embedded in the culture of higher education, and trickles down to the way courses are taught. This assumption privileges students who have been cued to think they are college material, as well as those who learn effectively through reading and writing. Humanizing recognizes that engagement and achievement are social constructs developed through the background and experiences students bring to college and the educational environment provided for them. Looking at engagement and achievement through this lens nudges educators to shift the burden from students to the barriers within our own practices. Humanizing removes the affective and cognitive barriers from online learning, and provides a pathway towards a more equitable future for higher education that supports the success of all students.

As online course enrollments continue to increase and serve more diverse learners, research is needed to identify strategies that effectively foster an inclusive course climate from a distance. While the theoretical frameworks that underpin inclusion in online courses are similar to those in on-campus courses, how to best implement these frameworks in asynchronous online courses presents unique challenges, remaining a murky topic for institutional leaders, instructors, instructional designers, and instructional technologists. The research-based Peralta Equity Rubric (2019) is one resource that institutions are beginning to use to foster inclusive learning in online courses, and is a sign that online courses are emerging as a critical component of equity efforts.

Humanizing offers clear, practical teaching strategies for online instruction that cultivate an inclusive online course climate better able to support the cognitive and affective differences that co-exist within a college course. Instructor-student relationships lie at the heart of humanizing, serving as the connective tissue between students, engagement, and rigor. Humanizing strategies use welcoming visuals and warm asynchronous communications to establish positive first impressions, trust between the instructor and students, and a culture of care in the online environment. To leverage the potential that humanized online education offers for equitizing the future of higher education, institutions must keep students at the center of decisions and invest in professional development to prepare faculty who teach online.

Theoretical Frameworks

Humanized online instruction is informed by many well-known theoretical frameworks including validation theory, culturally responsive teaching, social presence, and UDL.

Validation Theory

Online education is at a crossroads in higher education in the United States. To many institutions, it appears as an "easy" way to cut costs and is used as a vehicle to increase enrollments. Courses at those institutions are more likely to feel like they're on auto-pilot than taught by a real person. Other institutions are beginning to recognize that online courses have real potential to move the needle *if they are designed and facilitated effectively.* As the diversity of college students increases and the workforce continues to demand more skilled workers, the

latter scenario will become critical for institutional leaders to recognize and value. The online modality is distinct from classroom instruction and, as such, online courses should be designed to leverage the full potential that the web and digital technologies bring to teaching and learning. However, some classic elements of effective teaching transcend modality.

In the 1990s, Rendón (1994) showed that students who entered college with self-doubt about their ability to succeed were more likely to be transformed into "powerful learners" when they experienced in-class academic validation from a faculty member. Academic validation, which was found to be needed most by low-income, first generation college students, was achieved when faculty demonstrated concern, were personable and approachable, treated students with respect, provided scaffolded learning experiences that allowed students to develop confidence in their abilities, worked independently with students who needed support, and provided meaningful feedback. In 2011, Linares, Muñoz et al., wrote, "When validation is present, students feel capable of learning and have a sense of self-worth (p. 18)." Validation theory has served as a developmental framework for institutions serving diverse student groups for decades. Humanized instruction uses validation theory and answers the question, "What does that look like online?"

Culturally Responsive Teaching

CRT theory recognizes that groups of students are comprised of diverse cultures and contribute to a richer learning environment when diversity is viewed as a value. Many students come from cultures that are collectivist in nature, meaning they emphasize relationships, interdependence within a community, and cooperative learning (Hammond, 2014). In contrast, higher education in the United States values an individualist culture, expecting students to independently navigate challenging new situations, which contributes to competition and celebrates individual achievement. When CRT is embraced, learning environments are designed to be inclusive, valuing more collectivist cultural archetypes and ensuring all students feel included. A humanized online learning environment embraces CRT by establishing a safe, trustworthy course climate through instructor-student relationships and rigor through empathy and collaboration.

In research supporting Rendón's early findings, Palacios and Wood (2016) conclude that "personal relationships typified by trust, mutual respect, and authentic care were necessary and were primary conditions that foregrounded effective pedagogy" (p. 5) among African American men in college. Palacios and Wood go so far as to suggest the idea of "relationships before pedagogy" (p. 5); in other words, it is essential to establish a caring and trusting environment where students believe the instructor knows and supports them so that learning can then take place.

A supportive and trusting community of learners happens more readily when instructors humanize themselves. As Hammond explains, "The most powerful thing we can do to create a culture of caring is to allow ourselves to be seen as human beings, not just in our role as teachers" (2014, p. 80). But the act of humanizing does not mean "oversharing." Hammond calls it practicing "selective vulnerability" (2014, p. 79). We need not share all the skeletons in our closets, but in appropriate situations it helps students when we narrate our own struggles and, sometimes, our own failures. Telling our stories helps establish trust and model perseverance for students, many of whom are suffering greatly from self-doubt and fear of being exposed, a condition known as the Imposter Syndrome.

Social Presence

Despite evidence that validates the importance of instructor-student relationships, research shows that interactions in online courses tend to be infrequent and often limited to written text, which may lead students to feel isolated and unsupported (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). More institutions have begun adopting the use of a rubric to improve the quality of online courses; however, rubrics that address interaction generally limit the focus to *quantity*. Improving the *quality* of interactions in an online course is what promotes social presence -- the degree to which a person is perceived as "real" in mediated communications (Gunawardena, 1995). Social presence is important because it is shown to increase students' satisfaction with their instructor, interactions, and perceived learning (Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Russo & Benson, 2005; Swan & Shih, 2005). Humanized instruction encourages the use of a supportive tone in written communications and incorporating asynchronous videos of the instructor, which have been shown to increase social presence (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012) through their ability to convey affective indicators (expression of emotions, use of humor, and self-disclosure).

Universal Design for Learning

UDL is a popular framework used in K12 teaching that is gaining traction in higher education. The principles of UDL derive from neuroscience and are designed to support learner variability. A helpful analogy that explains UDL is to imagine if all people were given a size 8 shoe and expected to wear it every day. While that seems ridiculous, UDL suggests that the design of a learning environment operates much the same way, privileging some students and leaving others out.

The UDL guidelines provided by CAST in 2018 support the affective, recognition, and strategic networks of the human brain, which influence the "why," "what," and "how" of learning. Humanizing strategies model these guidelines by emphasizing relationships and community, using images and videos for instructor communications and student-student discussions, and providing high-touch support for the students who need it most. Further, in a humanized online course, students who have a known cognitive difference, like dyslexia, or a disability, like hearing loss, are more likely to be supported without needing to ask for an accommodation. This removes a barrier for students who may feel stigmatized by the need to request an accommodation in the first place.

Why is Humanizing Key to the Future of Learning?

As the demand for online courses increases and the diversity of the online student population grows, humanizing will become essential to support students in achieving their academic goals. The number of postsecondary students taking online courses continues to grow (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017): in fact, nearly 30% are taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Community college students are more likely than undergraduates at four-year public institutions and four-year private colleges to take at least one online course, underscoring the appeal of online learning to minoritized student groups (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017). Overall enrollment increases are expected to continue in the following groups: female, ethnically diverse, age, pell grant recipient, and first-to-college (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017). The demand for online courses and changing demographics among the students they serve bring significant implications for the future of learning. To ensure maximum success for all, institutions will need to adapt to meet rapidly changing student needs.

Online education matters especially to minoritized student groups because it increases access in areas where they have historically been left to fend for themselves. Equity-minded educators consider these students *high opportunity students*. But the question remains, how does this translate to the practice of teaching? When teaching online, each name on the screen must be recognized as a real human with a story. Faculty who teach online need to understand how and why to unveil these stories, to design a course that values and celebrates students' unique experiences, and to facilitate assignments that invite students to share. One must also acknowledge that sharing is not easy for students, especially when they feel marginalized. Online instructors must first establish trust with learners before meaningful peer-to-peer interactions are expected to occur (Palacios & Wood, 2016). Possessing an understanding of how to establish an inclusive class climate at a distance will be an essential skill for online educators as the students served by colleges and universities continue to become more diverse.

Why is Humanizing Especially Important for STEM Courses?

Humanizing undergraduate online STEM courses is of particular importance as the United States works toward increasing the diversity of the STEM workforce (Estrada et al., 2016). According to a study by Estrada, et al. (2016), only 14.7 percent of STEM bachelor's degrees were attained by minoritized students in the United States in 2010. The academic pathway that contributes to this workforce flow is fraught with performance gaps, particularly for minoritized students. These gaps are even greater for minoritized students in the online learning environment (Figlio, Rush, & Yin, 2013; Hart, Friedmann, & Hill, 2018; Jaggars & Xu, 2014).

While much ink has been spilled in recent years about the link between student mindset and academic success (Dweck, 2008; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2019), there has been a dearth of literature that looks at how faculty mindsets affect student performance. This is changing. Recent research shows that the beliefs *faculty* hold about their students' abilities is a concerning and largely overlooked contributor to equity gaps. A 2019 study by Canning, Muenks, Green, and Murphy comprised of 150 STEM professors and more than 15,000 students found larger racial opportunity gaps in courses taught by faculty with a fixed versus growth mindset about student ability. Professors with fixed mindsets tend to believe that some students are more naturally inclined to succeed in STEM. These mindsets are influenced by cultural stereotypes that portray White and Asian students as more innately poised for success in math and the sciences than students from minoritized groups. As such, faculty are more likely to use demotivating cues in their interactions with students of color. For example, following a poor grade on a single test, a Black or Latinx student in a math course may receive the message that "not everyone is cut out for math," whereas a White or Asian student is cued to "try harder next time." Fixed faculty mindsets also work to reinforce the competitive nature of STEM courses, which rely on summative exams designed with the expectation that students will succeed independently.

These findings are telling, especially in light of previous research that links sense of belonging to student persistence in STEM majors. Rainey, et al. (2018) found that students from minoritized groups are less likely to feel they belong in STEM courses and now we have evidence demonstrating that the way faculty teach and communicate with students is part of this problem. In short, *teaching matters*. Faculty who teach STEM courses must have access to professional development that emphasizes the value of interpersonal relationships in their discipline (Shaffer, Marx, & Prislin, 2013) and engages students in self-reflective activities about their own beliefs surrounding intelligence (Center for Community College Student Engagement,

2019). It is rare for these types of growth opportunities to be provided in higher education, and when they are, they almost always assume that faculty are teaching in a traditional classroom -- leaving online courses out, as if they aren't even part of the picture. Humanizing is customized *for* online education and holds significant potential for improving the climate in online STEM courses by ensuring faculty possess the skills and tools to construct their presence online and foster positive instructor-student relationships at a distance.

How Does One Equitize Higher Education through Humanized Online Teaching?

Online courses can provide welcoming and supportive learning environments for students when faculty have a foundational understanding of equity as well as the skills and support to design and facilitate inclusive, culturally responsive online learning environments with strong instructor social presence. Below is a summary of six key strategies that support humanized online instruction.

1. A Liquid Syllabus

The syllabus plays many roles in a college-level course. Often, instructors labor over their syllabus, filling it with course policies and procedures, as well as institutional regulations. To students, the syllabus can feel more like a list of do's and don'ts, which can increase a learner's anxiety and self-doubt.

Many practitioners have reimagined new opportunities for the syllabus -- Bain explores the concept of a promising syllabus in *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004), and Harrington and Thomas write about the transformative power of a syllabus in *Designing a Motivational Syllabus* (2018). In a 2011 study, Harnish and Bridges found that a syllabus written in a friendly tone has a significant impact on how students perceive an instructor by unhinging the common student expectation that "faculty are unapproachable" (p. 1).

In short, a course syllabus offers many opportunities for making a meaningful first impression with students at a moment when they are most vulnerable. And first impressions matter to students -- in fact, they are shown to matter more than an instructor's reputation (Buchert, Laws, Apperson, & Bregman, 2008). In an online course, the syllabus is the first connection a student has with an instructor, and in humanized online courses it is intentionally designed to welcome and support students. It is written in a supportive tone and uses asset-based language to encourage growth, cultivate hope, establish expectations for success, and recognize the array of experiences and knowledge students bring to the class as a value that enriches learning. But a humanized online course takes the syllabus one step further.

Humanizing involves designing a *liquid* syllabus that is created using a website tool (Google Sites, Adobe Spark Page, Wordpress, etc.) that can be viewed by students without logging in to a Learning Management System (LMS) or other secured environment (Pacansky-Brock, 2014b, 2017). By using a tool that is native to the online environment, a *liquid* syllabus responds to a student's viewing device, rendering clearly scrollable text when viewed on a smartphone phone -- and maximizes an online instructor's first impression on students. Depending on the device settings, students may also be able to make text larger and opt for a dark view, which is easier to view in low light setting.

A liquid syllabus also provides unique opportunities for fostering social presence. A syllabus created with a website creation tool allows instructors to embed a brief video on the page, ensuring students have the opportunity to be greeted with a warm, smiling face and hear supportive words prior to reading the content (more like a face-to-face classroom experience).

Digital images can be easily interspersed through a liquid syllabus to establish a welcoming tone and to more effectively support the understanding of content by students from different cultural backgrounds who represent diverse groups of people.

Instructors of humanized courses send a pre-course email to students during the week prior to a course that includes a link to the liquid syllabus. Student who read this email on a smartphone may click the link, be welcomed by their instructor, and have direct access to the information they need to start day one on the right foot.

To learn more about the benefits of a liquid syllabus, view the 3-minute video below.
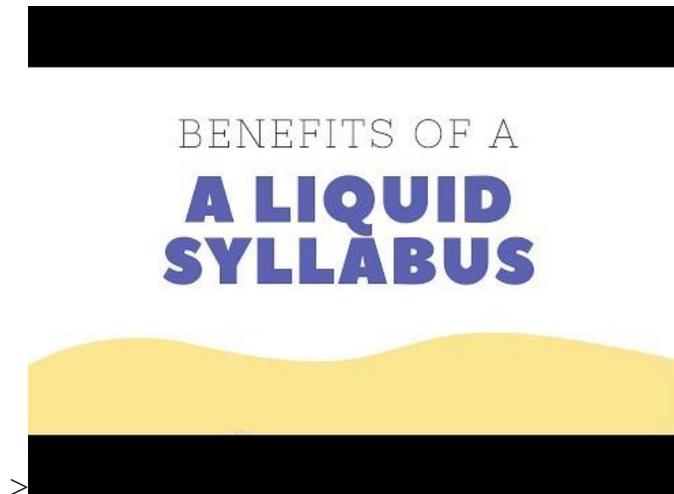
View a sample of a liquid syllabus created by Arnita Porter, faculty at West Los Angeles College.

2. Adaptive Teaching

One of the first concerns faculty often voice when learning about humanized online teaching is, "How can I offer a high touch learning experience when I have so many students?" The answer to that question is illuminated through what we call adaptive teaching. While adaptive learning technologies are designed to adapt on-the-fly to provide additional support or challenge for students based upon their competencies, adaptive teaching is a pedagogical strategy that helps faculty use locally sourced micro-data provided by students to identify which students will benefit most from high-touch communications. Faculty then cultivate high-touch communications throughout a course with these *high opportunity* students. To collect the qualitative data that helps faculty identify their high opportunity students, a survey is assigned in week one. By completing the survey, students receive their first points in the course, feel a sense of achievement and, simultaneously, provide essential information about themselves that faculty use to guide their teaching.

While questions on the form may vary, it is important to keep in mind that, in addition to providing the instructor with important information, this form also conveys to students that their instructor cares about them. Some suggested questions are listed below:

- *Select your preferred pronouns from the list below.*
  - *she/her/hers*
  - *he/him/his*
  - *they/them/theirs*

- ○ *Other: _____*
- *Which of the following describes you (check all that apply):*
  - ○ *This is my first semester of college.*
  - ○ *I am the first in my family to attend college.*
  - ○ *This is my first time taking an online class.*
  - ○ *I work more than 15 hours per week.*
  - ○ *I am a caretaker for at least one person.*
- This question provides students with the ability to opt out of receiving voice/video communications from the instructor without being expected to reveal why (which may unjustly require students to disclose a disability). *I may communicate with you through voice or video messages this semester.*
  - ○ *That sounds great to me!*
  - ○ *I would prefer written communications*
- *"In one word, describe how you are feeling about this class."* From past experience, most students will reply with neutral (fine, ok) or positive (excited, intrigued) responses but there are always a few students in a course that convey responses like "nervous," "overwhelmed," and "anxious," which may indicate a student is experiencing stress that may jeopardize their likelihood of staying in the course. Responses to this question quickly allow an instructor to identify high opportunity students who would benefit most from the human touch. Reaching out immediately to these students with a supportive message, delivered in video, promotes psychological safety and fosters trust, which are the foundations of relationships. These high touch interactions in week one ensure students know their instructor cares and reduces the sense that they'll be on their own throughout the course.
- *"Identify one thing that may interfere with your success in this course."* This open-ended question can transform a name on a screen into a human with a complex life. It informs instructors about a host of issues that would otherwise remain invisible and be left out of the teaching and learning process. Responses often include descriptions of work obligations, learning differences, injuries, parental responsibilities, upcoming surgeries, childbirths that will occur during the course, care for ailing family members, and recent return from military service. Instructors collect this data in week one and reference it throughout the duration of the course while observing student performance and engagement. If a student does not log in one week, an instructor can reference the students' situation and reach out with a brief, supportive email like this one, "Hi Sarah. I noticed you didn't submit last week's assignment. I remember you mentioned that you have been caring for your mom and I thought I'd reach out and see how you're doing. What can I do to support you? Hope to see you back in the class soon."

To ensure the micro-data from the survey is utilized to guide teaching throughout an online course, instructors are encouraged to incorporate it into the roster. In Canvas, for example, the Grades area includes an optional Notes column, which is especially useful. As participation ebbs and flows, the notes can be referenced and updated to ensure that the instructor's teaching adapts to each students' needs and that the instructor's presence supports the growth and development of high opportunity students. View a sample student information survey you can use in your own online course.

3. Visually Appealing and Dynamic Homepage

In the same way that the syllabus plays a key role in establishing a positive first impression with students, a course homepage also influences students' lasting perceptions about a course. Within seconds of students' first entrance into a course, the aesthetics and function of the course homepage forms their perceptions about the course's credibility and usability (David & Glore, 2010). A visually appealing homepage that clearly communicates what to do next can improve students' self-efficacy and motivation in an online course. At the start of a new term, a humanized online course greets students with a homepage that contains minimal text; a colorful and visually appealing banner (with alt-text for accessibility); a brief, captioned welcome video from an instructor; and a clearly labeled "start here" link to ensure students navigate to the correct area of the course. As the term progresses, the homepage changes to reflect current content, communicate essential information to students, and convey instructor presence.

View the video below to experience a humanized course homepage in Canvas, featuring Mike Smedshammer and Tracy Schaelen, facilitators for the Humanizing Online Teaching and Learning course offered by California Community Colleges California Virtual Campus - Online Education Initiative (CVC-OEI)/@ONE.

4. Asynchronous Video Communications

Video is commonly used in the teaching of online courses, often as a vehicle for delivering lengthy lectures. However, research from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) shows that online students are more likely to watch videos that are no longer than 6-minutes, and videos with a "personal feel" may be more engaging than slick recordings made in a studio (Guo, Kim, Rubin, 2014). Further, research shows listening to an instructor's voice increases a student's sense of being connected to a community, improves retention of the spoken content, and establishes the sense that the instructor cares about the student (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2006). In humanized instruction, video is used in line with this evidence. Instructors use brief videos with a low-production value recorded with a simple webcam or their smartphone and, in some cases, created with free and low-cost tools like Adobe Spark or Screencast-o-matic. Not only do the videos explain content, they also convey an instructor's active engagement and presence throughout an online course. Instructors use them in announcements sent to the whole class, in learning modules to provide embedded preview and review segments or tell a story to connect content with the real world, and to deliver warm, personalized feedback in the gradebook for high opportunity students (see adaptive teaching above).

In humanizing, faculty are encouraged to create videos that are off-the-cuff, unpolished, and recorded in locations untethered from the academic workplace. When professors portray

their imperfections -- the "ums," quizzical expressions, background interruptions like a cat jumping on the desk or a child peeping in the background, and move away from their desks to record in their daily settings -- they become real and relatable. In other words, they become "humanized." Students begin to sense that their online instructor is a real person with imperfections and a busy life, much like them. These types of similarities contribute to positive teacher-student relationships (Gehlbach et al., 2016) by establishing psychological safety and trust, which is especially important in the early weeks of an online course when students are most likely to withdraw.

The video below, by Denise Maduli-Williams, who teaches English for Speakers of Other Languages online at San Diego Miramar College, was made with Clips, a free app for Apple mobile devices that provides auto voice-text captions (that can be edited on the fly). In the video, Denise shows her students where to find her office on campus.

In the example below, Fabiola Torres, Ethnic Studies professor at Glendale College, demonstrates how to use a smartphone to record a "video postcard" (a term she has coined) for students. Torres uses video postcards to remind students that she is thinking about them even when she is away from campus.

In the video below, Michelle Macfarlane, Agriculture professor at Sierra College, uses Adobe Spark, a free tool, to tell a story about her life that also introduces her students to their Q&A discussion group, which she has titled The Truckstop. Personal anecdotes like this help Macfarlane connect with her students.
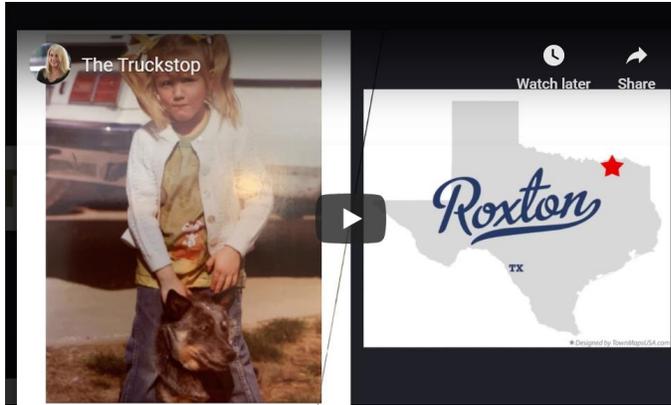
The video below, created by Matt Mooney, history professor at Santa Barbara Community College, is included at the start of a new content module. With Adobe Spark, Mooney visually communicates sticky topics included in the module that students are known to struggle with.

5. Asynchronous Video Discussions

Even the most committed online faculty can struggle with feeling disconnected from their students. Synchronous video conferencing tools like Zoom, Adobe Connect, and Skype are great, but pose barriers to students who take online courses to accommodate their busy schedules. It is common for online faculty to excitedly arrange a Zoom session only to have one or two students attend. This is why *asynchronous* discussion tools are so important in online courses, as they allow students to learn on their own time. But when students are only given the option to express themselves in writing, it may be more difficult for instructors and students to bond with one another, as textual communication lacks paralanguage, which is the non-spoken dimension of speech that includes body gestures, intonation, speed, sounds made between words, and facial expressions.

Further, relying on writing alone creates learning barriers for students with cognitive differences. A student with dyslexia, for example, may comprehend a concept and be able to articulate her knowledge verbally, while her written expression of the same concept may convey to an instructor that she doesn't understand. Providing multiple means of expression (and, better yet, giving students options in how they express themselves) is a principle of UDL and a powerful way to foster inclusivity in a course.

Designing discussions with warm, asynchronous voice and/or interactive video technologies like VoiceThread and Flipgrid opens new opportunities for community building and cognition in online courses. Data from student surveys of online community college students conducted by Pacansky-Brock (2016) showed that regular use of asynchronous voice/video tools increased students' sense of belonging to a community and resulted in improved verbal skills.

When students move from recording videos with a webcam to their smartphone, more possibilities for making connections emerge. Mobile videos allow students to venture into their own surroundings and *show* aspects of their environment to their peers. This feature of mobile video can inspire instructors to design engaging prompts that encourage students to connect the course content with their everyday lives -- like a field trip, only virtual. For example, Jaime Hannans, a Nursing faculty at California State University, Channel Islands has her students venture into their local communities to identify locations of automatic external defibrillators (AEDs). Through the student-student and instructor-student interactions, the group discovered that the AEDs were located in different locations, based upon the student's county. Janet Mitchell-Lambert, English faculty at Cerritos College, has her students read several poems and then go to a location that is referenced in the poem. Students then reflected on why they selected that particular poem, how their location connected with it, and spoke their favorite lines. Using video in this manner not only connects course curriculum with the real world, making learning more relevant, but it also increases opportunities for students to discover similarities with their peers that are shown to foster relationships (Gehlbach et al., 2016).

However, asynchronous voice and video technologies can create barriers for some students. Recording oneself places a person in a vulnerable position as it discloses more information about a person than written communications. Instructors must be sensitive to the fact that some students who learn online may take the course at a distance to avoid judgments that come along with being seen or heard. This may include judgments made about a student's accent, the color of their skin, a physical disability, or a speech impediment like stuttering or slurring of words. Having students use video instead of writing to express themselves may also increase instructor bias. A 2018 study found instructor race and gender biases in online discussions, showing that White male students receive more responses from an instructor (Baker, Dee, Evans, & John, 2018). When students use video to express themselves, instructors must be more vigilant about their unconscious biases.

To support all students, an instructor must take care to introduce a new technology in a mindful manner. This includes explaining why the tool has been selected for use in the course. This is a great opportunity to include positive feedback from past students. When students feel included in the rationale of the design of a course, they are more likely to be willing to try something new. Instructors should also provide students at the start of the term with a clear plan that describes the frequency they will be expected to use these types of technologies, as well as instructions for getting started and troubleshooting. Further, it is especially important to ensure students are given clear instructions about how to use the mobile app for the tool, as this can be tricky especially if the tool is integrated into the LMS. Smartphones are typically the preferred recording method for college students. And to counteract one's own bias, instructors are encouraged to track the frequency of responses to all students using LMS analytics.

Using a voice or video tool for an ice-breaker activity is a good way to begin a new term in a humanized online course. Ice-breakers that elicit information from students about their life experiences, particularly those that link in some way with the curriculum, offer students a low-stakes opportunity to try out a new tool while also weaving the early threads that form

community. When possible, it is advisable to give students choices in their commenting method, but students may feel apprehensive about recording themselves and, therefore, be more likely to default to writing if that option is provided. Pacansky-Brock (2014a) found that students are more willing to choose to record a voice/video over writing if all students are asked to use the media recording in a low-stake activity with an actively engaged instructor who provides supportive feedback to each student.

View an excerpt from Jaime Hannan's virtual field trip with VoiceThread:

View an excerpt from Janet Mitchell-Lambert's mobile poetry assignment with Flipgrid:

6. Wisdom Wall

Including the experiences of students within the design of a course makes learning more relevant. To put this strategy into practice in a digital learning environment, Pacansky-Brock (2012) encourages the use of the Wisdom Wall, a simple activity that can be applied in a variety of ways. At the end of the course, a project, or after an exam, the instructor asks students to reflect on their experience, identify a piece of advice for future students, and share that advice on the Wisdom Wall. When the Wisdom Wall is shared with future students, it becomes a treasure trove of voices with which students identify more intimately than advice from an instructor. Also, the Wisdom Wall is a practical way to promote students' growth-mindset. When students recognize growth and development in their peers, they are more likely to adapt the concept to themselves.

Instructors can use a variety of tools to create a Wisdom Wall including Google Docs, Padlet, or a wiki page within the LMS; however, asynchronous voice and video tools like

VoiceThread and Flipgrid allow the advice to resonate more intimately with students. View an example of a [Wisdom Wall](#) from Michelle Pacansky-Brock's course made with VoiceThread.

Fueling Systemic Change through Professional Development

Ensuring faculty master the skills to teach effectively will become more important as colleges and universities attract and enroll more diverse student groups. And becoming an effective *online* teacher will require innovations in faculty development that transcend face-to-face workshops. Colleges and universities must place a priority on preparing faculty to teach online humanized courses and be innovative in the preparation and delivery of professional development (PD).

The California Community Colleges (CCC) system offers more for-credit online courses than any public system in the United States. More than 20% of the roughly 2.1 million students served by CCCs takes at least one course online (Johnson & Mejia, 2014). The CCC Chancellor's Office funds a statewide effort, CVC-OEI, to connect students with more high quality and fully supported online courses across California's 114 community colleges. To support this initiative, a robust offering of online, low-cost PD courses, programs, and events are provided by CVC-OEI/@ONE. Among these offerings is a 4-week course on Humanizing Online Teaching and Learning and another course on Equity & Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Online Environment. The following quote from a course participant demonstrates the impact of preparing faculty to teaching online with humanized online PD:

> "My presence matters so much more than I thought. I was guilty of trying to be a neutral voice with a professional (aka sterile) presentation of content. I see now that being active, responsive, present, and empathetic is so vital to … my students."

There is no ad lib when teaching online. The visual feedback cues that instructors receive from students in face-to-face instruction are not present in an online class. Presence must be intentionally constructed, and placing faculty in the seat of an online learner with an engaged, empathetic online instructor is the best way to begin to prepare faculty to teach online. Professional development that preparers faculty to teach humanized online courses should be designed with the following goals in mind:

1. Foster empathy for students. To grow into empathetic online educators, faculty must be immersed in online learning environments themselves to experience them the way students do. Doing so creates powerful mind-shifts as faculty recognize unexpected challenges and find themselves reaching out to ask for an extension on an assignment. It is not uncommon to have faculty say, "I now know what it is like to be an online student."

2. Model humanized instruction with one (or more) present, aware, empathetic facilitators. Faculty who resist online teaching have likely never experienced a well-facilitated online course. As a result, they approach their first course with the mindset that all online courses are dry and disconnected. Every online PD experience is an opportunity to shift faculty mindsets about the rich and rewarding potential of online teaching.

3. Empower faculty to become self-starting creators of digital content. When faculty teach online, they need to be capable of solving their own technical problems producing their own digital content. Most faculty teach part-time and cannot rely on support from on-campus teaching centers. They need digital toolkits and training to be able to work independently. Moreover, slickly produced videos and publisher-provided PowerPoint

presentations are more likely to feel sterile to students. Creating one's own content may not result in Hollywood quality, but it is more likely to capture an instructors' personal touch and character (Guo, Kim, Rubin, 2014).

4. Provide a safe, judgment-free zone for experimentation. Feeling vulnerable in new situations is part of being human. For college instructors, the fear of looking stupid in front of one's peers is especially nerve-racking and has been shown to be a factor that can prevent faculty from teaching with technology (Herckis, Scheines, & Smith, 2017). Professional development must recognize and support risk-taking by couching these uncomfortable experiences within the context of growth-mindset. Facilitators of professional development must be transparent, openly admit when they've made a mistake, and share stories about their own growth with using digital tools.

5. Ensure faculty master the basics of the asynchronous video workflow. The mobile era has revolutionized video. Like their students, nearly all faculty now have a video creation tool at their fingertips in the form of a smartphone. Faculty who master the art of chunking content into brief videos, recording from a mobile device and webcam, evaluating proper lighting and sound, uploading videos to a server (e.g. YouTube), captioning videos, and embedding them in an LMS possess critical digital fluencies for humanizing online courses.

6. Model UDL and ensure it is embedded in the content creation process. Ensuring all students can access content is not only a federal requirement, it is also a commitment to inclusion. Further, providing students with multimodal learning environments will ensure more students have what they need to succeed without needing to ask for accommodations. UDL also cuts down on the expensive and time-consuming task of remediating inaccessible digital content.

7. Help faculty understand how to use quantitative LMS analytics paired with qualitative student data to recognize which students need support, when the support is most needed, and where it is likely to have the most impact. Ultimately, faculty should use student data to adapt their teaching to the changing needs of students throughout a course.

8. Provide a safe, judgment-free environment to experiment, make mistakes, and grow. Instructors often feel vulnerable when asked to record their imperfect presence on video. Faculty must be encouraged to reflect on their growth and consider the changes in how they feel about using new tools.

9. Be designed to eliminate "PD Melt." Faculty are most likely to make actionable changes to their teaching during the period immediately following professional development when. However, returning to everyday routines often undercuts even the most well-intentioned changes. To remedy this, faculty-support peers (instructional designers, distance education coordinators, instructional or academic technologists) must be in place as a post-PD scaffold to support faculty with course redesign.

Evidence of the Spread of Humanized Online Instruction in California

Each year, roughly 98,000 California State University students earn undergraduate degrees, and about 50% of them transfer from a California Community College. Through cross-system collaborations and sharing of faculty development OERs, humanized online instruction is gaining traction, and research will soon examine its impact on equity gaps.

In 2015, CSU Channel Islands began to offer a 2-week humanizing course as part of its Online Teaching Preparation Program. In the first four years, 91 or about 18% of all faculty have

completed the program, which is coordinated through CI's Teaching and Learning Innovations team. For a period of time, faculty from other institutions were invited to participate in the program and offered a Creative Commons-licensed version of the humanizing course. As a result of that collaboration, the professional development course has also been offered at CSU Humboldt and Santa Barbara Community College.

Between 2018-2019, more than 200 faculty and staff from across the 114 colleges in the CCC system completed the CVC-OEI/ @ONE humanizing course (referenced earlier). At the time of writing, CVC-OEI/@ONE is preparing to share an OER version of the course in the Canvas Commons (Instructure's LMS resource repository) so it may be adopted by any institution that uses Canvas.

In 2019, a cross-system group of 7 faculty received a $1.3 million grant from the California Education Learning Lab to examine the impact of humanizing practices on equity gaps in online STEM courses. The 3-year grant project entails developing a 6-week Humanizing STEM Academy that will scale across the CCC, CSU, and UC systems. The project will culminate in 2022 with a free, online Humanizing STEM conference and publicly shared OERs including research findings and a humanizing toolkit showcasing resources shared by STEM faculty participants. After the grant period, the Humanizing Academy will be absorbed into the CVC-OEI/@ONE PD offerings.

Institutional support for faculty who teach online and a commitment to improving concerning equity gaps are the key factors that contribute most to making systemic changes in the pedagogy of online courses. Both of these priorities derive from placing students at the center of all that we do.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, one can imagine two futures for online education. In one version, institutions with an eye on maximizing enrollments and cutting costs will choose to invest funds in the latest technologies to build large-scale learning models that can be easily replicated. In this scenario, faculty play no role in the design of courses, and are hired on the cheap to fulfill tasks that ensure compliance with accreditation requirements, like sending canned announcements and applying rubrics to grade student work. For students, these courses will be akin to grabbing dinner from a drive-through. In the alternative future, institutions value the students they serve and invest in faculty, instructional designers, and instructional technologists to support the design and facilitation of authentic learning experiences that guide students towards their academic goals. Faculty and support staff feel valued, and instructors feel connected to both the courses they facilitate and the students who take them. For students in these courses, learning is more like experiencing a delicious meal customized to one's own dietary needs with meaningful dialogue and connections.

As bots and algorithms play a bigger role in online courses, institutional leaders will need to make a conscientious decision to ensure relationships remain at the heart of learning. Humanized online instruction is central to a future in which technology increases access to college *and* supports the individualized needs of all students.

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