

HUMANIZING DIGITAL LEARNING: STRATEGIES FOR AMPLIFYING EDUCATIONAL IMPACT

Lilia PORUBIN

Universitatea Tehnică a Moldovei

Articolul subliniază importanța tot mai mare a educației digitale în instituțiile superioare și necesitatea de a adopta o abordare „centrată pe om” pentru a maximiza potențialul cursanților. Această abordare se concentrează atât pe nevoile studenților, cât și ale educatorilor, recunoscând perspectivele lor unice. Trecerea la învățarea online prezintă provocări, solicitând educatorilor să proiecteze cursuri virtuale care reproduc dinamica interpersonală. Menținerea angajamentului și a relațiilor în cursurile virtuale este crucială pentru bunăstarea atât a studenților, cât și a instructorilor. Textul subliniază importanța unor strategii precum orele de birou, lucrul online în grup și interacțiunea generală pentru a crea o atmosferă asemănătoare sălii de clasă și a favoriza conexiunile între studenți și instructori. Aceste măsuri contribuie la un mediu de învățare online mai receptiv, care se adresează nevoilor individuale ale studenților. Umanizarea învățării online implică recunoașterea studenților ca indivizi cu nevoi unice, trecând dincolo de simpla interacțiune cu dispozitivul. Textul discută provocările din mediile online asincrone, subliniind importanța interacțiunilor sincrone pentru combaterea sentimentelor de deconectare. Sunt sugerate diverse strategii pentru umanizarea învățării online, inclusiv utilizarea tehnologiei pentru a spori disponibilitatea și implicarea, feedback personalizat și încorporarea diverselor activități de învățare. Relațiile profesor-student sunt evidențiate ca fiind cruciale în învățarea online, având un impact asupra percepțiilor și satisfacției studenților.

Cuvinte-cheie: *umanizare, învățare online, empatie, încredere, conștientizare, învățare individualizată.*

The text underscores the growing importance of digital education higher institutions and the need to adopt a 'human-centered' approach to maximize learners' potential. This approach focuses on the needs of both learners and educators, recognizing their unique perspectives. The shift to online learning presents challenges, requiring educators to design virtual courses that replicate in-person dynamics. Sustaining engagement and meaningful relationships in virtual classes is crucial for the well-being of both students and instructors. The text emphasizes the significance of strategies such as office hours, online group work, and overall interaction to create a classroom-like atmosphere and foster connections between students and instructors. These measures contribute to a more responsive online learning environment that addresses individual student needs. Humanizing online learning involves recognizing students as individuals with unique needs, moving beyond mere device interaction. The text discusses challenges in asynchronous online environments, emphasizing the importance of synchronous interactions to combat feelings of disconnection. Various strategies are suggested to humanize online learning, including the use of technology to enhance availability and engagement, personalized feedback, and the incorporation of diverse learning activities. Instructor-student relationships are highlighted as crucial in online learning, impacting students' perceptions and satisfaction.

Keywords: *humanizing, online learning, empathy, trust, awareness, individualized learning.*

Digital education has become an integral component of education institutions, encompassing a broader range of instructional, learning, and evaluative methods than ever before. It is crucial to adopt a 'human-centered' perspective in digital learning to ensure that learners can maximize their potential. This approach prioritizes the needs of learners while recognizing the significance of educators in the educational process. It is distinct from student-centered learning, as it involves considering the perspectives of both learners and teachers. In this approach, attention is given not only to the cognitive skills of students but also to the overall well-being of both students and teachers.

The shift from traditional face-to-face education to online interaction has presented challenges for both educators and students. Designing online course experiences that replicate the in-person dynamics is a demanding task. Sustaining engagement and establishing meaningful relationships in virtual classes are crucial for the well-being of both students and instructors. Distance learning students often express concerns about missing networking opportunities, meeting with instructors after class, or collaborating with peers for group work or projects. In response, distance educators aim to create a sense of presence in online settings, humanizing virtual learning with the primary goal of enhancing the overall quality of educational experiences.

In virtual classrooms, technology can either enhance the connection between instructors and students or act as a barrier. Humanizing online learning enables educators to preserve the collaborative, engaging, and interactive aspects of face-to-face education. This involves recognizing students as individuals with unique learning needs and challenges, moving beyond a mere interaction with their devices.

Various approaches to humanize online learning ensure that each student receives the necessary support, time, and information for their success. Achieving success in this endeavor hinges on establishing meaningful student-instructor relationships. The utilization of online course software and applications has the potential to enhance the availability and engagement of classes, resources, and instructors for a broader student audience. Integrating technology benefits students by facilitating access to quality instruction and learning activities through increased online resource availability. According to Michelle Pacansky-Brock's research, providing personalized feedback, along with incorporating "check-ins" and "ice-breakers," supports students in becoming more successful learners.

Preferences for learning activities, modalities, and media vary among different cultures and individual students. However, it is crucial to align these preferences with methods that best assist students in achieving specific learning outcomes. While some students may prefer collaborative learning, others may lean towards independent study. To enhance learner participation, it becomes essential to offer various activity options that allow students to choose approaches that align with the same educational objectives, ultimately aiding their success. These choices play a pivotal role in maintaining motivation, particularly when students are primarily receiving instruction in front of a computer, lacking the traditional classroom interactions with teachers and peers. Just as educators might be hesitant to lecture over Zoom due to the inability to see students, these learners also desire

opportunities to engage with others. Establishing office hours, facilitating online group work, and encouraging overall interaction within an online class are crucial strategies for creating an environment responsive to individual student needs. These measures contribute to a classroom-like atmosphere, fostering connections between students and instructors that are challenging to replicate in an asynchronous learning setting.

In university settings, socialization and the development of in-person relationships are typically supported. The implementation of humanizing teaching strategies necessitates active participation from both instructors and fellow students. Despite being mediated through a computer screen, this supportive human interaction can significantly enhance the richness and rewards of the online learning experience for all participants.

To enhance the human aspect of online learning and teaching, activities should facilitate meaningful class engagement using available digital tools. Similar to face-to-face classes, both students and instructors must allocate time for class discussions and the process of getting to know each other. Instructors play a crucial role in creating interactive and compelling lectures, employing intriguing questions that prompt deep thinking, offering personalized responses, and providing feedback on student work that considers their individual situations to best support their success.

The humanizing approach incorporates learning science and culturally responsive teaching into asynchronous online courses, aiming to establish an inclusive and equitable class environment for today's diverse students. While teaching online, it's easy to perceive students merely as names on a screen; however, they are much more than that. They are resilient individuals with diverse perspectives and knowledge, shaped by experiences influenced by factors like racism, poverty, and social marginalization. In humanized online courses, positive instructor-student relationships are given priority, serving as the "connective tissue between students, engagement, and rigor" (Pacansky-Brock 2). Regardless of the learning modality, human connection is crucial to counteracting emotional disruptions that hinder many students from reaching their full potential, and in online courses, establishing this connection is even more vital.

As per Pacansky-Brock, the fundamental principles that form the foundation of humanizing an online teaching course are comprised of the following interlinked elements:

1. Trust – Establishing rapport and building trust with online learners is paramount. This involves revealing your "humanness" through selective glimpses of your life, shared via storytelling, pictures, or personal experiences. Let your personality shine to create a connection.
2. Presence – Recognize that you, as the instructor, are the primary connection for online learners. Maintain constant communication by providing regular text, audio, or video updates, reinforcing your accessibility, engagement, and commitment to assisting them in succeeding in the course.
3. Awareness – As an instructor, your ability to understand and connect with your students is crucial. Tailor your support to their individual needs by actively discovering and getting to know them.

4. Empathy – Be attuned to the online learner's experience. Adopting a phenomenological perspective allows you to comprehend the learner's feelings, perceptions, challenges, and needs, fostering a more empathetic and supportive online learning environment.

Humanization involves establishing a learning environment that embraces and supports every individual, recognizing their potential for achieving success. This necessitates a commitment to continuously acknowledging and addressing unconscious biases, as well as dismantling the hierarchical power structures ingrained in White dominant culture. Instructors leading humanized online courses are aware that students from non-majority backgrounds often face feelings of uncertainty about belonging and are susceptible to stereotype threats. These challenges can disrupt the emotional pathways influencing cognition, hindering optimal performance. Establishing human connections in the learning process creates a sense of safety, alleviating the psychological impact of stereotypes. With cognitive resources freed up, more students can enter the Zone of Proximal Development, fostering an environment conducive to learning.

Social isolation tends to intensify when students engage in remote learning, distancing them from both peers and instructors. To address this, humanized online courses incorporate cues of kindness and social inclusion during the critical "high opportunity zone" – the week before instruction begins and the first week of class.

Teaching is an evolving practice, especially in the online realm, where educators may envision an ideal learning experience but lack clear, practical steps to achieve it. The following eight humanizing elements are suggested as a starting point, encouraging educators to implement, adapt, and personalize them. Observing the impact on students' engagement and performance can provide valuable insights.

For years, advocates of education and accessibility have been dedicated to creating high-caliber online learning experiences, transitioning from a broadcast-oriented model centered on information delivery to an engagement-oriented format emphasizing creation and collaboration. The past year saw a universal shift, with all students becoming online learners. This abrupt change prompted universities to recognize the significance of designing a comprehensive online student experience.

For those unfamiliar with the field, online learning was often perceived as dull and lacking engagement, with students having to self-teach. The sudden reliance on digital platforms sparked ongoing discussions comparing a remote delivery experience with one specifically crafted for online learning. This heightened scrutiny has brought greater attention to the merits of quality online education, emphasizing the benefits of interactive courses. Digital dependence for both learning and teaching has become the standard rather than the exception.

A fully digital and engaging student experience requires a deeply integrated culture and a workforce attuned to technology. It demands dedication both inside and outside the virtual classroom, with a design approach centered on prioritizing the student. By adopting change models, crafting a digital transformation strategy, and concentrating on designing around the student experience, higher education institutions have the opportunity to propel themselves into a more advanced, digitally integrated future.

When learners feel a strong sense of social presence, they are more likely to engage in higher-order thinking and actively participate in online discussions. Additionally, a heightened social presence reduces the likelihood of students dropping out of their classes and increases overall satisfaction with the learning experience. An effective approach to enhance social presence is the use of video discussions, allowing students to apply their learning rather than merely fulfilling rubric requirements.

The interconnectedness of culture and people is undeniable. Culture significantly influences how knowledge is shaped within a particular group of students. Therefore, culturally responsive teaching emerges as a pedagogical approach that ensures comprehensive and equitable access to education, recognizing and celebrating the diverse cultures of all students.

Learning should be a source of attraction rather than a forced obligation. It is crucial to recognize the inherent value of your digital learning program. The success of your new digital learning solution depends on your employees perceiving the effectiveness of the learning program or course. Building trust in the digital solution and illustrating its benefits are essential. Here are some advantages for learners:

1. **Continuous Learning:** Humans learn more effectively through short, continuous learning interventions rather than sporadic crash courses. Digital learning facilitates this by allowing access anytime, anywhere, and on any device. Providing modern employees with flexible, bite-sized learning content across various touchpoints ensures a continuous learning experience.

2. **Individualized Learning:** Each learner possesses unique needs in terms of content and learning style. For instance, the "communication training" required for a salesperson may differ significantly from that needed by an IT employee. Traditional classroom training often fails to address these diverse needs. Digital training content can be tailored to suit individual requirements while achieving the overarching learning objectives crucial for driving business results.

3. **Enhanced Employee Experience:** The potential for information overload can be overwhelming for employees, especially newcomers. Many employees now prefer web searches as a primary learning channel, leading to wasted time and energy in finding relevant information. Delivering curated content directly to employees through digital learning platforms not only optimizes resources efficiently but also contributes to a positive employee experience.

Enhancing eLearning through interactivity and immersive experiences involves actively involving learners with instructors, subject-matter experts (SMEs), or their peers. Various tools can be employed to enrich the delivery of your digital learning program:

1. **Video Tools:** Generate concise videos that allow the incorporation of animations, still images, music, and more, adding depth to your video messages.

2. **Interactive Role Plays:** Transform existing scripts into captivating role-play simulations by selecting characters and constructing dialogue scenes effortlessly using a drag-and-drop editor. No design or technical skills are necessary.

3. **Certification:** Recognize learners' accomplishments by awarding certificates upon course or test completion, validating their qualifications and skill levels.

4. **Polling:** Whether delivering Instructor-Led Training (ILT) or Virtual Instructor-Led Training (VILT), incorporating polls is essential. Polls are highly effective in ensuring course engagement, placing learners at the forefront of their development process.

5. **Digital Bulletin Boards:** Foster creative collaboration by establishing boards around specific topics, inviting learners and work teams to contribute ideas, images, videos, and comments.

6. **Digital Brainstorming:** Facilitate collective ideation, even among remote team members, using an online brainstorming tool. Post a question or idea and encourage colleagues to respond, generating real-time word clouds from their answers.

Humanizing online learning involves the instructor's ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with learners, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Additionally, the establishment of "humanization" allows learners to gain insights into the instructor's personality, serving as a reference point for building their own connection to the course. Crucially, this approach can make online learners feel valued, nurturing a strong rapport and trust between the instructor and learner. Ultimately, when humanizing online learning takes place, learners experience a sense of camaraderie, a willingness to participate in the learning community, a perception of support from the instructor, and positive affirmation of success throughout the online learning journey.

To humanize an online course, educators should consider the following strategies:

1. **Be Authentic:** When creating audio or video content, express your genuine self.

2. **Biographical Engagement:** Utilize visuals, storytelling, vlogs, or music for a personal biography instead of a traditional written introduction.

3. **Establish Presence:** Maintain regular communication through short video/audio clips to reassure students of your continuous support.

4. **Embrace Imperfection:** Present yourself as a relatable "person" in video and micro lectures, avoiding excessive editing for a more authentic connection.

5. **Encouraging Messages:** Share personal stories from your student experience or provide inspirational and motivational videos to uplift students.

6. **Seek Feedback:** Create a chat room for anonymous questions or concerns, encouraging continuous feedback on class content and framework.

7. **Personal Sharing:** Share aspects of your life weekly, such as jokes, your pet's habits, hobbies, or recent shows you've enjoyed, showcasing your authentic self.

8. **Visible Presence:** Make appearances during micro lecture recordings to put a "face to the voice."

9. **Utilize External Resources:** Incorporate supplementary materials like TedTalks or videos featuring presentational speakers.

10. **Live Check-Ins:** For asynchronous courses, offer spontaneous "Live" check-ins where students can drop by to say hello or address course-related questions and concerns.

Entering a new online learning environment, especially in advanced degree programs, students harbor concerns about feeling connected, belonging, and receiving responsive support from instructors. While our instructional goals prioritize fostering inquiry, curiosity, agency, and growth, we recognize the paramount importance of care and belonging in facilitating effective learning.

Caring, in the context of teaching, is a relational practice where instructors establish connections with students and exhibit concern for their overall well-being and performance. This relational approach cultivates a sense of belonging in the online learning space, achieved through verbal and nonverbal expressions of care, knowing students individually, exploring their backgrounds, being well-versed in available support resources, and addressing their concerns.

To create a pedagogical focus on care, instructors must consciously allocate class time or design experiences aimed at developing relationships and expressing care. A learning space centered on empathy and collaboration emerges when this approach is applied. Design and instruction efforts prioritize relationship-building, meaningful activities, and assessments, connecting course content to students' lives. This pedagogy of care fosters a sense of belonging, leading to more successful academic outcomes for students.

At the core of any interaction lies the learners or individuals, each possessing unique qualities, emotions, experiences, personalities, and perspectives that contribute to the connection. Merely establishing conditions for interaction does not guarantee meaningful connections. To create a sense of connection for learners with the learning content, peers, and instructor, interactions must be intentionally designed to honor the individual's uniqueness and allow flexibility.

While peer-to-peer learning stands out as a potent tool in the online learning environment, its effectiveness relies on the consideration and design of affective learner aspects or social-emotional learning (SEL). Without such considerations, we fail to create a comprehensive interaction or exchange between learners. In instances where peer-to-peer learning is poorly designed, as seen in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), attrition rates are suboptimal, and success is primarily determined by the motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, brought by the learner. The shortcomings of poorly designed peer-to-peer learning manifest in scenarios where achievement is driven by motivated learners rather than deep and enduring connections with others.

In conclusion, the transformative shift towards digital learning emphasizes the need for a human-centered approach, recognizing the intrinsic value of educational programs. The success of these digital solutions hinges on cultivating trust and showcasing the tangible benefits for learners. Continuous learning, individualized learning, and enhanced employee experiences are key advantages emphasized in this context. Furthermore, the integration of interactivity and immersive experiences through various tools, such as video tools, interactive role plays, certification, polling, digital bulletin boards, and digital brainstorming, enhances the overall delivery of digital learning programs. These tools actively

involve learners with instructors, subject-matter experts, and peers, contributing to a more engaging and dynamic learning environment. Humanizing online learning is crucial in addressing the challenges posed by the shift to virtual classrooms. Recognizing students as individuals with unique needs and challenges, creating meaningful relationships, and fostering a sense of community are essential aspects of this approach. Strategies such as authenticity, biographical engagement, regular presence, embracing imperfection, encouraging messages, seeking feedback, personal sharing, visible presence, utilizing external resources, and live check-ins contribute to humanizing online courses.

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