Humanizing Learning: Concepts and Strategies to Design and Implement Now

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Humanizing teaching supports the affective and cognitive dimensions of learning. The concept often is used in online education, but it is necessary for any modality to build a learning environment that is relationship-rich. This article discusses the principles and elements of humanized learning, helpful theoretical frameworks, and strategies that can be implemented and practiced in any instructional setting.

Introduction

Humanized teaching often is used specifically with online learning and frequently is referred to as humanizing online learning or humanizing online teaching. In the online education dimension, humanized teaching supports the affective and cognitive dimensions of learning at a distance. It begins with human presence and trust to foster instructor-student relationships that build the intellectual capacity of diverse students (Pacansky-Brock, 2020). The concept is rooted in culturally responsive teaching (Hammond, 2014), validation theory (Rendon, 1994), social presence, and Universal Design for Learning, tying them all to the online environment. Humanized learning not only includes fully online learning, but also blended, hybrid and face to face learning. Therefore, the modality of teaching and learning is not a major factor to implementing humanized teaching.

The impact of humanizing instruction, when implemented early and often, can be a game-changer for both the student and the instructor. When learners are able to relate to instructors beyond the subject-matter identity and view themselves as part of a learning community, they likely are more motivated, satisfied with their learning, and able to achieve the learning objectives (Pacansky-Brock & T&L Innovations, n.d.).

This article examines the relationship-rich concept of humanized learning by first discussing the four principles that weave together with various elements to form the concept. Next, two frameworks in which humanized learning thrives

are explored. Finally, eight strategies on humanizing a course are offered for instructors to consider implementing in their courses.

Overview

Principles and elements

The four principles of humanizing are trust, empathy, awareness, and presence. Collectively, they provide the environment where students can find increased success. In addition, for the instructor, there are three key humanizing elements to consider putting into action. They are actively cultivating human presence, identifying high opportunity students, and being a warm demander.

The four principles and the three elements work together to shape humanized teaching. The first humanizing principle of trust is aligned to the humanizing element of *actively cultivating human presence*. Once trust is established, instructors can demonstrate the element of *being a warm demander*, in which instructors expect highly of their students, guide them to see their own intellectual contributions, and help them to achieve their potential in a structured environment.

The second humanizing principle of empathy aligns to the humanizing elements of *actively cultivating human presence* and *identifying high opportunity students*. With empathy, instructors strive to see matters, concerns and ideas through the lens of the student. They identify students' needs, are flexible, and help students meet their goals.

The third humanizing principle of awareness is aligned to the humanizing element of *identifying high opportunity students*. Through awareness, instructors learn about who the students are, and how they best can be supported.

The fourth humanizing principle is presence, aligned to the humanizing element of *actively cultivating human presence*. When presence is practiced, instructors intentionally and authentically share themselves through brief videos or audio that can be posted as announcements. Instructors also can post warm messages or quotations that encourage students to pursue their studies. This kind of interaction helps students to know the instructor is following the same journey.

Theoretical frameworks

In addition to the facilitation aspects of humanizing learning (trust, empathy, awareness, and presence), there are also course design aspects of humanized

learning that help to build a valuable experience for students. The two frameworks discussed in this section can serve as guides in designing a humanized learning environment in a course.

Six C's of motivation

The first model is the six C's of motivation by Wang and Han (2010). The six C's are choice, challenge, control, collaboration, constructing meaning, and consequences. Each one is explained.

Choice

Having options can help increase intrinsic motivation. When students are given options to choose assignments that mirror their personal interests, their intrinsic motivation to do the work should increase.

Challenge

Getting students out of their comfort zones will help them to grow. The dilemma for many educators is that difficult work can raise anxiety, but tasks that are too easy lead to boredom. In both instances, motivation toward learning decreases. To make learning goals challenging, students can search for more information to improve and revise their tasks, which plays an integral part in the learning process.

Control

Involving students in decision-making processes, content organization, and other tasks gives them a shared measure of control.

Collaboration

Students can share learning strategies and perspectives with each other through social interaction, a concept in which Vygotsky (1978) theorized that communication and collaborative group work can enhance thinking and learning and empower individuals. Collaboration seems to work best when students depend on each other to reach a desired goal, when there are rewards for group performance, and when students are able to work together effectively.

Constructing meaning

If students perceive the value of knowledge in a real-world setting, their motivation to learn increases. Setting a meaningful goal for students is an important factor to promote motivation.

Consequences

When students have opportunities to showcase their work, their motivation is likely to increase. No matter the course modality, instructors can display student work on class websites or online course pages, or on the walls of classrooms. In addition, students can display their work at campus gatherings or at conferences.

Community of Inquiry

A framework that is referenced often for humanizing learning is Community of Inquiry (CoI). Some theories of distance education highly regarded student independence, whereas early learning theories focused on interpersonal communication between teacher and student. The CoI theoretical framework is a process of creating a collaborative-constructivist learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements that are humanizing-related attributes: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence, all of which are created through interpersonal communication. To be effective, all three presences must be developed in balance (Akyol & Garrison, 2008). Each is explained briefly.

Social presence

This element is designed to support critical inquiry. Therefore, social presence means being in an online environment that supports and encourages questions and skepticism, as well as the expression and contribution of ideas. When social presence is established, collaboration and critical discourse is enhanced and sustained (Garrison & Akyol, 2013.).

Cognitive presence

At the nexus of a community of inquiry, this presence requires engaging students in all phases of practical inquiry. A moderator or an instructor who can assess the nature of the discourse consistently is needed to advance the critical thinking component.

Teaching presence

This third dimension is the key element in integrating social and cognitive presence during the inquiry process. It serves as the glue in the development of an online community. Simply, teaching presence is what the instructor does to create a meaningful community of inquiry.

Either or both of these frameworks can serve as the foundation for instructors to select one or more of the eight strategies of course design to support humanized

teaching and learning. The next section will identify each of the strategies and briefly explain how it can be used in a course. Most of the strategies are offered in the context of online delivery, but they can be adapted to in-person courses.

Eight strategies of humanized learning course design

Pacansky-Brock (2020) suggests using any of the eight strategies when building a course with a humanized learning focus. The following strategies or approaches are provided in the context of online course design, but they also can be planned for any modality.

Liquid syllabus

A liquid syllabus (Pacansky-Brock, 2014, 2017; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020) minimizes a student's pre-course anxieties with warm, nonverbal cues and hopeful language that enlightens what students need to know about the course to be successful in the first week. This approach often is a public, mobile-friendly website that features a brief, imperfect welcome video. A video in the course announcements or on the home page of the course also can accomplish the goal of a liquid syllabus.

Humanized homepage

Students should be greeted with a friendly homepage when they enter the course. The instructor can include a visual banner that greets the student, a brief video that welcomes the student and clearly informs how to proceed or navigate the course, and a noticeable "Start here" button that links to the first module for the student to complete.

Getting-to-know-you survey

A confidential survey that is given in the first week can convey to students that the instructor desires to know who they are. With this strategy, instructors can gather necessary information about individual students, what they need to succeed, and how best to support them. This survey can be designed using the quiz feature in the learning management system, or through other digital tools such as Google Forms.

Warm, wise feedback

Wise feedback is targeted feedback that conveys high expectations, the instructor's authentic belief that the student can meet those expectations, and details to help the student meet the expectations. The word *wise* does not

necessarily mean smarter or better. Rather, wise feedback refers to psychological interventions that explore how people make sense of themselves, others, and social situations that may affect their learning (Bose, n.d.). Instructors can frame statements in ways that communicate warm, wise feedback, such as these:

> "I am giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them."

> "The expectations in this course are high and I know you can do great work. The feedback here is designed to help you get there."

This kind of language and structure helps learners to feel like they belong in the course. Plus, helpful statements convey high standards, assuring learners that they can reach them. Constructive criticism also is essential. This includes providing clear pathways and specific directions, and guidance on how students can achieve success. Many learning management systems have grading tools that allow instructors the space to enter specific, measurable, and helpful feedback.

Self-affirming ice breaker

Helping students to feel comfortable during the first week of class will make a tremendous difference. Giving students early opportunities for them to share their values, hopes, dreams, and experiences matters in the long run. Students can engage with their peers and their instructor through an ungraded or zero-point discussion in which they introduce themselves. They can enter text, upload a photo of themselves, or record a video or audio file, using the tools in the learning management system or third-party tools such as FlipGrid.

Wisdom wall

Student-faculty interaction is a large part of humanizing, but so is student-student interaction, as noted in the social presence of the Community of Inquiry model. One way to encourage this is through what Pacansky-Brock (2020) has termed a *wisdom wall*. The idea behind the wisdom wall is to ask students at the end of the course to identify something they wish they knew at the start of the course. Students share this on the wisdom wall, which is presented to the next set of new students at the beginning of the course. Various tools in the learning management system can be used, such as a page in which students can edit. External digital software, such as VoiceThread, also can be used.

Bumper video

Bumper videos are brief, approximately 2-3 minutes in length; are visual, with images; and are engaging. Instructors can create a bumper video to introduce a module or a new concept. These will help students because the mode of content delivery is varied, providing differentiation. In face-to-face courses, instructors can introduce a new concept or topic through a brief learning activity, a question, or a prompt.

Microlecture videos

Creating a microlecture video allows students to focus on a specific topic. They can watch the video at their own pace — slow it down, speed it up, and rewatch it as needed. A microlecture video should be approximately 5-10 minutes long and tightly focused to a single topic. For in-person classes, the instructor can speak on a topic for approximately the same time length and then have students discuss in small groups or reflect on what they just heard. This helps learners comprehend because the content and material are chunked into bite-sized pieces, building the learner's cognitive dimension of the CoI framework.

Conclusion

Humanized teaching and learning provide for a relationship-rich education environment, regardless of the mode of instructional delivery. This article highlighted principles, elements, theoretical frameworks, and strategies that can be used immediately in a course. The strategies listed in this article and observed in the scholarship of humanized teaching and learning are not exhaustive. As education continues to vary in delivery modes, instructors will be challenged to consider other ways of humanizing their teaching for effective student learning.

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