# *Understanding What Works in Humanizing Higher Education Online Courses: Connecting through Videos, Feedback, Multimodal Assignments, and Social Media*

Olivia G. Stewart
St. John's University

## Abstract

In a post-COVID world, online education is more important than ever. Understanding how to make digital learning environments more humanized for learners can lead to more engaged learners. This study explored the experiences of 56 online graduate students to understand what components of asynchronous, traditionally formatted online courses centered around textual discussion posts can be adapted to further humanize the course for both students and teachers, and how humanizing these courses affects the students' interactions and learning experiences. Findings indicated that most of the changes made (weekly introductory videos from the professor, rich and detailed feedback, options for multimodal discussion board responses, and hash-tagged social media posts from students and professor sharing personal events) were met with positive response for humanizing the course. Post-course surveys also shed light on additional requested techniques for humanization in online courses.

***Keywords*:** Multiliteracies, multimodality, graduate students, social media, humanizing techniques, mixed methods

## Introduction

Teaching and learning in digital spaces became the new norm, especially since the pandemic. In 2021, nearly 11.2 million students enrolled in online courses in public and private higher education institutions, and these students are more racially diverse than their counterparts enrolled in face-to-face courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Even prior to COVID-19, from Fall 2016 to Fall 2017, students who took at least one course online increased by 350,000, which means that the number of students taking at least one online course had increased to one third of the postsecondary population (Lederman, 2018). However, online courses can often lack the personal interactions/experiences that are more common in traditional courses that help students to feel connected, which can be particularly detrimental for academically marginalized students (Gleason, 2021; Jones et al., 2008; Kuo & Belland, 2016; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020).

This kind of connection is important, as the more closely tied professors and students are, the more engaged students become (Kop, 2011). From a sociocultural perspective, students' social practices and experiences are valued in the meaning-making process and tailoring curricula to include and value these practices may lead to more engaged learners (Bialostok, 2014; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Mills, 2009). Consequently, both pre- and post- pandemic, many researchers have emphasized the importance of creating more humanizing learning environments in digital spaces where teachers and students are connected and viewed as whole people (Czerkawski & Schmidt, 2017; Gleason, 2020; Kuo & Belland, 2016; Li et al., 2022; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020; Qiu & McDougall, 2015).

Therefore, this study examines how online courses can become more "humanized" to improve the social connections and learning experiences for online students. Working with doctoral students across multiple sections of a required online, asynchronous theory survey course, I examine the following research questions: 1) What components of asynchronous, traditionally formatted online courses centered around textual discussion posts can be adapted to further humanize the course for both students and teachers? and 2) How does humanizing these courses affect the students' interactions and learning experiences?

## Theoretical Framework

Courses framed by a humanizing pedagogy value "students' background knowledge, culture, and life experiences, and [create] learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers" (Bartolomé, 1994, p. 248). Humanizing online courses therefore

serves to establish a more equitable learning environment wherein power and privilege can be negotiated from a less top-down framework.

Working from a multiliteracies perspective, I assert that digital texts (defined broadly) are a central aspect of human interaction (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1997) and interrogate how agency and power affect their creation and consumption. While other scholars studying literacy practices recognize the fluidity of culture and literacies, multiliteracies scholars emphasize the fluidity of the world and power relationships within as well as the ways in which people within those relationships adapt communication based on those power dynamics (Perry, 2012). Under this framework, I emphasize the need to embrace multiple forms of meaning making, particularly with multimodal texts. Multimodality is an emphasis on bringing multiple modes (or units of meaning like text, audio, pictures, video, color) together to be more than the sum of their parts (Jewitt, 2005). Examples include videos, picture books, social media posts, etc. When creating multimodal texts, students can show understanding in various ways and choose the way that is most apt for them (Kress, 2003).

According to Li and colleagues (2022), "In virtual environments, interpersonal interactions rely on computer-mediated communication, which is often text or graphic based and lacks auditory inflections and visual cues that are critical components of in-person communication" (p. 2). By only focusing on these textual modes, students' and teachers' other literacy practices are excluded, thereby limiting how much of themselves they can represent in the class and how they can most aptly show understanding of course concepts. Under a critical, multiliteracies framework, students and teachers work together to renegotiate the power structures typically established in the classroom to open spaces for multimodal authorship, criticality, and self-representation/expression (Mirra et al., 2018). Doing so can engage students, make them feel more connected to the course, and improve learning outcomes (Caskurlu, et al., 2020; Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012).

One student in the present study noted that "One of the demerits of online programs, as I have witnessed… is that it blocks me out from getting to know both my professors and colleagues very well. Connection in online program is mechanical." By humanizing online courses (and thus humanizing myself as the instructor and the students to each other), I aimed to improve the learning experiences for all students.

## Other Humanizing Efforts

Consistently, many scholars examining humanizing techniques have called for increased "student agency, instructor presence, and peer presence" (Li et al., 2022, p.

2). However, humanizing online courses has been approached from many different perspectives. For example, some have framed it through the communities of inquiry framework (Garrison, et al., 1999) where teachers actively facilitate spaces where students are viewed as whole selves and co-construct meaning (e.g., Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). In her study of nearly 2000 students using MOOCs (massive open online courses), which can be notoriously difficult to engage learners as they are primarily self-directed, Kop (2011) found that while some learners thrived with the inclusion of the more humanizing techniques (social media, videos, Google Maps to show the locations of the participants), many still struggled with the self-directed learning or did not enjoy having such a public presence in the courses.

Others approach humanizing online courses from a critical perspective of trying to better understand the current practices of instructors and the potential pitfalls of some of the techniques that might be unseen (e.g., Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). In their study, Mehta and Aguilera (2020) found that humanizing online courses can be a struggle for many teachers and requires a nuanced, personalized approach. Echoing previous scholars (e.g., Kop, 2011), they found that many efforts such as including student-led videos may inadvertently expose students' language barriers, accents, or disabilities that they may not wish to expose.

As these types of issues are brought to the forefront, it is imperative to understand how humanizing online courses can close the achievement gap between academically marginalized students and their counterparts in online courses (e.g., Hannon & D'Netto, 2007; Mbati, 2021; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). In their survey of diverse online South Australian college students, Hannon and D'Netto (2007) found that cultural differences account for a larger difference in engagement and communication in online programs. By recognizing these differences, instructors can again critically examine the ways in which they are presenting information, engaging students, and asking students to show understanding.

As we continue to move to increasingly more online courses, researchers must understand best practices of humanization. Li and colleagues (2022) examined 17 online community college courses, discovering eight predominant humanizing techniques across the courses centered around how instructors scaffolded online learning, encouraged student agency, and promoted student and teacher interactions, some of which are explored in this study as well: "Facilitate and encourage ongoing feedback from students" (p. 5), "Consolidate practices of social and academic presence" and "Establish and maintain instructor-student relationships throughout a course" (p. 6).

Because online courses are growing in popularity as learning begins to take new forms

(Lederman, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), digital-age literacies are becoming increasingly more important (Moje, 2016). By understanding how to better humanize online courses to improve learning experiences for alternatively formatted learning, we can begin to understand the needs that future students will have and redesign online courses to meet the needs of various kinds of learners.

## Context of the Class

This mixed method, action research spanned 3 semesters of online, asynchronous doctoral courses. The course was a required literacy theory course that was held for 15 weeks in the Spring and Fall and five weeks in the Summer using Blackboard learning management system (LMS), a commonly used LMS platform. I designed the course and was the only instructor who taught it to each cohort. The 56 exclusively-online participants ranged in age (24 to over 70), gender, and ethnicity and were located world-wide (though predominantly in the U.S.). See Table 1 for demographics.

Students had an option to meet with me at the beginning of the semester in lieu of their introductory blog post. Because this is a cohort model, students already knew each other well, but I wanted to offer a chance to meet with me one-on-one. Much like other asynchronous online courses (i.e., students work on their own and never meet synchronously), students submitted weekly module assignments via the LMS that typically included questions based on the week's readings to which they could respond via textual modes or through other options such as video (VoiceThread), infographics, presentations, graphic comics, etc. and respond to two peers.

**Table 1**

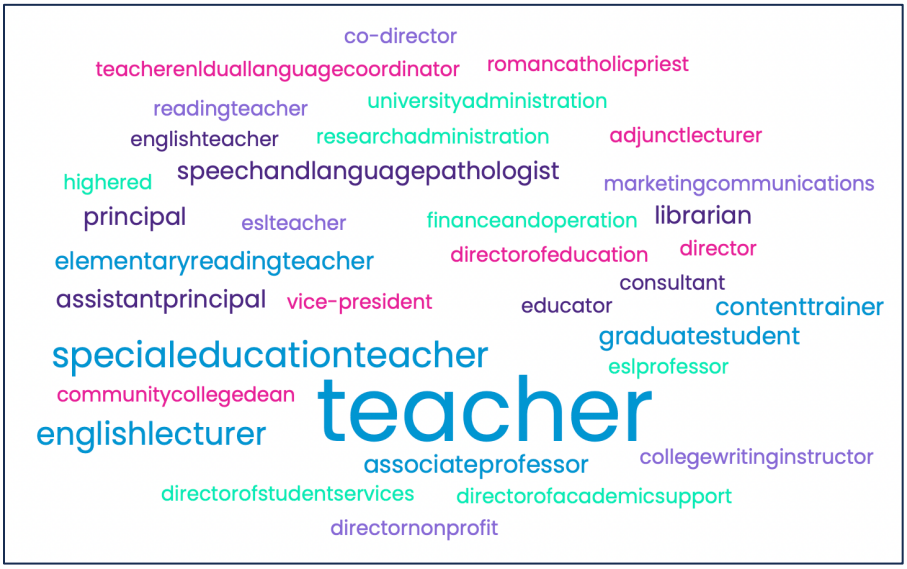
*Participant Demographics*

| Demographics | |
|---|---|
| Self-Identified Gender | 85.71% Female<br>12.5% Male<br>1.79% Transgender |
| Self-Identified Race | 71.43% Caucasian/White<br>16.07% African American/Black<br>5.36% Hispanic/Latinx<br>1.79% African American and Hispanic<br>1.79% Middle Eastern<br>1.79% Asian |
| Number of Online Courses Taken | 37.5% More than 10<br>32.14% 8-10<br>21.43% 5-7<br>8.93% 1-4 |
| | N=56 |

Figure 1 shows a Word Cloud visualization of the professions of the students, most of whom were in Education. The size of the word indicates the frequency with which it was reported.

**Figure 1**

*Self-described professions of the participants with more frequent professions in increasingly larger font.*




## Data Collection and Analysis

I collected several forms of data to address the research questions: 1) What components of asynchronous, traditionally formatted online courses centered around textual discussion posts can be adapted to further humanize the course for both students and teachers? and 2) How does humanizing these courses affect the students' interactions and learning experiences? I collected pre- and post-course surveys with Likert-type questions that explored previously used humanizing techniques and measured students' feelings about the humanizing aspects of our course as well as demographic data. The pre-course surveys included the consent letter and were therefore identified, but the post-course surveys were purposefully anonymous to encourage candidness in participants' responses. These surveys also included two open-ended questions ("Please explain any of your above answers if you feel that they require further explanation" and "Is there anything else you would like to add?"), to which 24 students responded to in the post-course surveys. Other data sources included:

- Student-teacher interactions throughout the course (via Skype/Zoom, email, phone, etc.).
- Optional social media posts (usually on Instagram/Twitter) to students' personal accounts with an indexing hashtag wherein students could share personal photos/videos/captions/ideas with the other students across sections of the course.
- Researcher memos reflecting on student interactions and the course.

The students who provided consent to participate per the university-approved IRB were aware that I would be collecting this information and that it would not affect their grades in the course. To reduce bias, I did not analyze the data until the courses were completed.

**Data Analysis**

This is a mixed method light, explanatory designed study where the qualitative data served to potentially explain the findings from the quantitative data (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018) to better understand the lived experiences of the students, in keeping with my multiliteracies framework. For the quantitative data, I ran descriptive statistics to find the averages (out of five) for each of the Likert-type questions on both the pre-course and post-course surveys (56 pre-course surveys and 46 post-course surveys).

For the qualitative data in the open-ended survey responses and interactions (e.g., email, social media posts, virtual office hours), I used axial codes (Saldaña, 2012). Axial codes included the elements that I used throughout the course to attempt to humanize them: multimodal assignments (like VoiceThread and video options), weekly professor introductory videos, social media, and feedback and whether the reaction to these elements was positive or negative for connection to the professor, colleagues, and/or material. I then used thematic coding for what kind of connection they served to establish. For example, when analyzing students' responses about weekly videos, thematic codes included personal connection to professor, comfortability, deeper connection to material, and additional feedback. I also coded social media and emails for how these related to the established thematic codes for the surveys and additional elicited interactions.

**Table 2**

*Data Sources and Analyses*

| Data | Analyses |
|---|---|
| Pre- and post-course surveys | Axial Coding for humanizing techniques (Saldaña, 2012)<br>Thematic coding for types of connection<br>Descriptive statistics for average responses |
| Student-teacher interactions | Wholistic coding for unsolicited interactions, feedback about the humanizing techniques<br>Researcher memos for my reactions (Erickson, 1992) |
| Social Media posts | Wholistic coding for unsolicited interactions; coding for student-student interactions<br>Researcher memos for my reactions (Erickson, 1992) |

Furthermore, rich, detailed researcher memos (Erickson, 1992) allowed me to not only process the amount of robust data, but also to analyze the data across and compared to the varying forms collected (i.e., via survey responses, social media posts, and meetings/interviews) as well as reflect on my own experiences as the course professor. Analysis of these memos was based on my thematic codes for each of the axial codes for the qualitative data.

## Findings

Findings indicate that most of the changes made (weekly introductory videos from the professor, rich and detailed feedback, options for multimodal discussion board responses, and hash-tagged social media posts from students and professor sharing personal events) were met with positive response for humanizing the course. Post-course surveys also shed light on additional requested techniques for humanization in online courses.

Analyses suggest that students felt a strong connection to the professor and to the other students because of the humanizing components. Below I first discuss the survey response data from the Likert-type questions for the pre-course and post-course surveys. I then explore how the introductory videos, detailed weekly feedback, options for multimodal assignments, and connections through social media served to humanize the course for most students.

## Survey Responses

Fifty-six students completed the pre-course surveys and 46 completed the post-course surveys across the three semesters. The instructor-designed surveys aimed to better understand what techniques made the course more humanized (e.g., video responses, group projects, weekly introductory videos) and if that was important to the students. I adjusted the survey for the Summer and Fall groups of students to more explicitly understand the ways in which multimodal assignment options helped to humanize the course for the students (see Table 4).

In their pre-course surveys, 22 of the 56 students – the largest response group – noted that they started an online program because of flexibility; 14 indicated that it was because of convenience. Others mentioned location, school reputation, and not having to quit their jobs as reasons for starting the program. While no students stated that they started an online program because of the connections they were able to build, many demonstrated through their responses that they were able to do so. Table 3 provides students' responses to the pre-course and post-course Likert-type survey questions.

**Table 3**

*Average Responses on Pre- and Post-Course Survey*

| Question | Pre-Course Average Response | Post-Course Average Response |
|---|---|---|
| I feel that programs like VoiceThread or other voice/video sharing programs make me feel connected to my colleagues | 3.60 | 3.82 |
| I feel that discussion posts make me feel connected to my colleagues | 3.64 | 3.87 |
| I feel that group projects make me feel connected to my colleagues | 3.55 | 3.89 |
| I feel that online courses allow me to feel connected to my colleagues | 3.09 | 3.53 |
| I felt that I got to know my peers in this course more than in other courses | N/A | 3.87 |
| I feel that online courses allow me to feel connected to my professor | 3.18 | 3.47 |
| I feel that weekly videos from my professor allow me to feel connected to my professor | 4.27 | 4.58 |
| I feel that programs like VoiceThread or other voice/video sharing programs make me feel more connected to my professor | 3.66 | 3.84 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I feel that frequent emails from my professor allow me to feel connected to my professor | 4.34 | 4.47 |
| I feel that detailed feedback from my professor allows me to feel connected to my professor | 4.69* | 4.76 |
| I felt that my professor cared about me as a person in this course | N/A | 4.76 |
| I felt that this course allowed me to get to know my professor more than other courses | N/A | 4.47 |
| It is important to me to feel connected to my professor in an online course | 4.52 | 4.4 |
| It is important to me to feel connected to my colleagues in an online course | 3.98 | 4.11 |
| I feel that online courses allow me to express myself | 4.05 | 4.18 |
| I feel that programs like VoiceThread or other voice/video sharing programs allow me to express myself | 3.52 | 4.24 |
| | N=56; *N=36 | N=46 |

*Note: "I feel that detailed feedback from my professor allows me to feel connected to my professor" was added to the pre-course survey after the spring semester, but they answered it in the post-course survey.*

The averages for each of the categories rose, some by large margins. The exception to these gains was only in "It is important to me to feel connected to my professor in an online course". A few explicated their reasons for a lower score in the open-ended section, noting that connection to peers and professors is not why they take online courses. For example, one student wrote:

> I said in my ratings that feeling connected to my professors is not really that important to me. That is because I've been going to school online for more than four years now and have done equally well in classes with instructors who do not engage much at all. Although I prefer your communicative style, at this point I know I can be successful without that connection.

Further, the averages were quite high for many of the categories about how the students perceived various humanizing techniques from the course as well as potentially valuing the need for humanizing in the course. The three highest categories ("I feel that detailed feedback from my professor allows me to feel connected to my professor," "I feel that weekly videos from my professor allow me to feel connected to my professor," and "I felt that my professor cared about me as a person in this course") will be explored in the following sections using qualitative data to delve deeper.

**Table 4**

*Average Responses on Pre- and Post-Course Survey (Added Questions)*

| Question | Pre-Course Average Response | Post-Course Average Response |
|---|---|---|
| I feel that video chatting with my professor allows me to feel connected to my professor | 4.42 | 4.31 |
| I feel that **options** for assignments/discussion boards allow me to express myself | 4.36 | 4.55 |
| I feel that **options for multimodal** assignments/discussion boards allow me to express myself | 4.33 | 4.59 |
| | N=36 | N=31 |

Table 4 shows the additional questions that I added to the survey for the Summer and Fall sections of the course to include direct questions about multimodal assignments as well as an optional video introductory meeting with me in lieu of an introductory discussion board post. The potential decrease in the first question about video chatting is because many of the students who responded to the question did not participate in the voluntary introductory video chat option. In keeping with the explanatory mixed methods design, the following qualitative data will shed more light on these findings.

## Weekly Introductory Videos

Other scholars have stressed the importance of instructor presence that can often be lacking in online courses that may otherwise be present in a traditional, face-to-face course (e.g., Caskurlu et al., 2020; Kuo & Belland, 2016; Li et al., 2022; Wise et al., 2004). Therefore, at the beginning of each week, I posted an introductory video with helpful information about the upcoming assignment, general group feedback about their previous week's assignments, and relevant information about what is going on in my life (writing, research, upcoming events, conferences attended, trips, my family, etc.). Many participants noted on multiple occasions that they appreciated the weekly videos, as they helped them to get to know me better. It was one of the highest averages on the post-course survey (4.58). One student wrote via unsolicited email:

> Thanks so much for your encouraging video feedback this week. I could see your excitement and genuineness shine through. The feedback really reinforced "hey, you're getting this" when sometimes when you're sitting at your desk alone, you wonder if you really are getting it!

That same week, five students ended emails wishing me a good trip, as I had told them that I would be out of town during a holiday break. This kind of personal connection and understanding of life events is not always seen in online courses where instructors and students rarely, if ever, meet. However, in sharing my own life with the students, I was able to establish more of a connection with the students that can be essential for engagement (DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011; Watson et al., 2016).

While these videos did not deliver lectures of course content like others have explored (e.g., Borup et al., 2012; Richardson et al., 2016; Young, 2006), they echo these findings that including videos with my own image served to make me more approachable to students. For example, many expressed that the weekly videos made students feel more at ease when contacting me (e.g., in a virtual meeting, one student noted that the weekly videos "just make me feel more comfortable reaching out"). The balance of power typically seen within courses is broken down as students can understand more of my life beyond a faceless person grading them that many may feel in an online course. Studies have shown that by humanizing an online course, the student to instructor psychological distance is reduced and students are more comfortable (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, 2005; Jones et al., 2008; Kuo & Belland, 2016), which the students articulated frequently throughout the course and again in eight instances on their post-course surveys in the final open question. Many also reached out to thank me at the end of the course via email, often noting that they enjoyed the videos (e.g., "I shall remember your insightful teaching, thorough professionalism in conjunction with a human touch, and brilliant videos for a very long time in life.").

However, not all students felt that this kind of humanization was important to their success, even if they appreciated it. In an open-ended portion of the survey, one student wrote:

> Although it is not vitally important to me to "feel connected" it is valued and I recognize the importance of connectedness in a professional learning environment. To that end, this course and [Professor] in particular provided an abundance of opportunities to connect with one another and herself. Her weekly videos were professional and personally engaging.

This was the only instance of neutrality specifically tied to the weekly videos in the qualitative data, and the student still appeared to appreciate them. Instead, most felt that the videos "help to make the course feel 'real' and are much appreciated. They are like a 'reward' for the weekly workload graduate work requires."

## Feedback

I often provided students with informal feedback in my videos as well, praising wonderful work on previous assignments, directing them to a particular student's excellent/funny presentation, encouraging them to continue to think about critical questions, etc. I also provided students with specific, extensive, targeted feedback on their assignments, often posing additional questions to encourage dialogue. Providing students with feedback via multiple modalities and encouraging them to do the same can engender a relationship with the instructor that is approachable and responsive (Li et al., 2022).

Though the average score of students' significance of feedback in feeling connected to the professor went down between the pre-course and post-course surveys, many students stressed its importance via qualitative data. For example, one student wrote "I thought the specific constructive feedback on weekly assignments helped me to connect my learning to the material and develop a professional connection with [Professor]." Perhaps, however, even though the students appreciated the feedback, it did not engender more of a connection between us but rather a connection to the text (e.g., "I really appreciated the detailed feedback from [Professor]; it helped me identify areas to focus on and reinforce my thinking and learning. I found this extremely helpful as I navigated the course this semester."). Though not specifically tied to a connection to the instructor, a connection to the material is equally important for the learning environment.

Furthermore, some students did not feel that the feedback from their peers strengthened a connection between them. A student expressed in the post-course survey that "Although I was able to get feedback from my peers through discussion posts, there was still a slight disconnect" and instead requested a synchronous session to help establish that connection. Based on Li and colleagues (2022) eight techniques, a strong peer-to-peer relationship is not essential but serves to humanize a course more for the learners. Perhaps structuring the feedback to be more specific and targeted as mine was would have increased this connection.

## Multimodal Assignments

Because many online courses are solely based in print-mode and are devoid of other modes (Li et al., 2022), I opened space for students to have many options throughout the course to create audio/video responses (via VoiceThread) or multimodal responses (e.g., PowerPoint, Prezi, Word documents with images, videos, and text) to present

their responses to weekly prompts. Each semester, roughly 75% of the students took up the chance to create a multimodal response to a prompt at least once. Like my instructor-created videos, student video responses not only allowed me as the professor to see, hear, and better get to know the students (through mannerisms, tone, and backgrounds), but they also allowed the other students to do so as well. This kind of interaction served to humanize students for the entire class, not just the professor, as students read/watch and respond to their peers' posts.

Furthermore, by allowing students to compose in the most apt modes they saw fit (Kress, 2003), students could write in ways that value the out-of-school literacy practices that they bring to bear on the course materials and meaning making (Mills, 2010, Vasudevan, 2010). In an open-ended survey question, a student noted "I was able to connect with colleagues and feel like part of a community despite this being online. I enjoyed posting in various formats and seeing the posts from peers to better understand and connect with them."

Furthermore, students were able to learn from each other through the assignments. One student noted in the post-course survey "I learned a lot from the PPT and Prezi presentations of my peers. I enjoyed working on my own multi-modal presentations as well. It was very creative." Here, they established a community where learning could flourish.

Multimodal assignments also offered students a choice in how they decided to present their ideas. In their study, Lindgren and McDaniel (2012) found that students were much happier in online courses that allowed for self-selected options for each week. Students could respond to the instructor-provided prompts based on the ways in which they felt most comfortable and the ways that were most apt to the material (Jewitt, 2005; Kress, 2003).

However, multimodal assignments may require students to be savvy with certain technological prowess and can often be daunting, and thus, some comments about it were polarizing. One student wrote in her post-course survey that although she liked the idea of creating a video response, she did not feel like she had time to do so. Others echoed this sentiment, noting that they were curious but did not create multimodal projects because it was easier to write their responses (e.g., "I wish I had explored the voice thread option this semester but with a kid at home and pregnant, it was just easier for me to type.").

## Social Media

Though other scholars have touted the benefits of connecting students and their communication practices to improve learning for students (e.g., Palloff & Pratt, 2010; Zainnuri & Cahyaningrum, 2017), the intended use of social media in this study was to connect students (and the instructor) on a more personal level outside of the course and course concepts. By posting and sharing their lives with other students and the instructor, I aimed to open spaces for additional connections and knowledge of each other that may not be seen in the more structured weekly responses, mirroring the interactions and small talk that may occur before or after a typical face-to-face class. Echoing the findings of Kop (2011), though not all students took up this opportunity, some did so with great enthusiasm, sharing personal and professional aspects of their lives (e.g., new haircuts, food, travel, presentations at conferences, etc.). See Figures 2-5.

### Figure 2

*A student's post about her healthy meal while updating her followers on her travel with interactions from other students in the class.*

**Figure 3**

*A video posted from my professional Instagram account of the University campus. Several students have commented (with replies from me) and liked.*

**Figure 4**

*A Tweet from a student about attending a conference and her excitement to attend.*


**Figure 5**

*A Tweet from a student about her achievement and other indexing hashtags.*

Students would also reference their posts in emails or discussion board posts as well (e.g., in an email "I don't know if you saw it on my Instagram, but I finally got the [job]!"). Though the students were located around the world, social media allowed them to connect in a more globalized and connected, personal way (Stewart, 2015, 2023). Though not all students participated in posting to social media, many of them still saw, commented, or liked photos. One lamented on her post-course survey that she saw the interactions on Twitter and wished she has more time to participate. Like multimodal assignments, there may be a barrier to entry for some who are unfamiliar with digital and social media to participant and may instead just "lurk."

Because I was also actively participating on social media with our hashtag, students were able to see me and forge a stronger connection with me as well. They could often see the connections between my videos and the things I was posting (e.g., I told them I was traveling to Italy and then posted several pictures throughout my trip). This connection allowed me to humanize myself within the larger scope of the out-of-class communication. Many noted in their post-course surveys that this helped to enhance their connection with me. For example, one student who did not post wrote:

> Your weekly videos and detailed feedback definitely helped me feel connected more in this class than any other! You seemed to actually get to know me as a person, although we never got to even talk on the phone... Your visibility on social media, especially Instagram, really helped this, as well.

Three students on the post-course survey (and many via email) also noted their interactions outside of the course via WhatsApp, Facebook, and texting as integral factors of feeling more connected to their peers (see Ortlieb et al., 2020). Though I provided hashtags and encouraged social media presence, perhaps having a more private space to connect and discuss was also important.

## What More?

To address the second research question further, I turn to the humanizing techniques that I included in the class for which students gave less feedback like optional group work, meeting with the professor at the beginning of the course, and sending frequent emails to students to reach out. While group work and frequent emails were still viewed positively on surveys, students did not discuss these elements nearly as often in the qualitative data (emails, meetings, open-ended survey responses, etc.). Though these may have still been effective at engendering professor and student connections, students did not comment on them with the same frequency and enthusiasm.

However, even though it is at odds with the asynchronous formatting of the course and program, some students (including five on the post-course survey) requested more synchronous or in-person meetings. For example, one student wrote “Opportunities to meet periodically on campus or in the tristate area would enhance the online experience even more.” Others echoed that despite the more humanized course, they still wanted to have a more synchronous experience to connect with their peers.

Like all good teaching, this humanizing work takes time and energy. While the weekly videos usually only took about a half an hour to record, edit, and upload, they can be easy to reuse if not careful and specific, which students notice. In an open-ended survey response, one wrote “The weekly professor videos that were current and relative showed caring and sensitivity to the learners. Often this is not the case in previous courses I've taken... Videos were 2, 3 or more years old.” Being vigilant and present will continue to establish connections with students throughout the semester.

## Discussion

As online education flourishes in the post-COVID world, media are increasingly mediating our lives and learning, and students continue to need social connections to learn, it is important to iteratively revisit how humanizing techniques in online education must adapt. Because of the numerous opportunities that today’s students have to interact with and learn from the expanding world outside of the classroom, educators need to explore new avenues for more connected, global, and humanized learning (Moje, 2016). This study looks towards accomplishing this goal by opening the spaces in which students can work and interact by socially constructing and interacting around more global texts while also shifting the often-rigid power structures of online courses.

My reflexive approach to understanding my own teaching practice helps improve curriculum design and instruction in the courses that I teach while also contributing to the growing body of research in the scholarship of teaching and learning that illuminates the future of literacy education. The humanizing techniques discussed here are by no means exhaustive but rather an insight into some practical measures that online instructors can take to improve the learning environment and establish more human connections.

However, it is important to note that students take online courses for a variety of purposes. Some may not want or feel the need to connect with their peers or professors in an online course and may take courses in that format to specifically be disconnected for various reasons. Several students noted that it was not important to them to feel connected in their post-course surveys, with one noting that they do not feel their

"success in this course is connected to feeling connected with other students." This highlights what Kop (2011) and Weller (2007) argue students may need either connection with people *or* with resources.

Furthermore, some of the humanizing techniques explored here may require students to be camera-facing, which can be vulnerable for some. As Mehta and Aguilera (2020) noted, many of the humanizing techniques that instructors employ may seem innocuous but may actually *other* students or make them feel uncomfortable by forcing them to be visibly/verbally present or interact with others while being so, removing the anonymity that online courses can provide.

Furthermore, students opting for online learning environment may need more reassurance to express themselves and their ideas openly to their peers. One student mentioned the idea of feeling safe enough to express her ideas and interact with peers on her post-course survey as a potential barrier to humanizing, noting that "It's the relationship and trust build. It's how safe we feel in exposing ourselves and our ideas…Basically, meaningful connection is formed when I trust that my peers know that I have the best intentions, but I may see the world differently." Li and colleagues (2022) found that this establishment of a safe space for students to work is an essential component of humanizing. Therefore, though it was not explicitly studied here, future studies may explore how safe/brave spaces can be cultivated. As online education continues to grow in enrollment, particularly for minority and academically marginalized students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), these safe spaces will become increasingly important, and they cannot occur without a more humanized approach.

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