Humanizing Online Learning
Please share in the chat what you miss the most about holding class in person, & what you feel have been some of your biggest challenges in teaching online.
The Problem:
Many digital tools can have dehumanizing effects

• They chip away at human connection
• They limit opportunities for heterogeneous groups & cross-ability collaborations
• Learners turn towards screens (or turn off their screens) rather than turning toward their professors & fellow learners
• Although we currently have little choice about online teaching, that doesn’t mean that we have to succumb to the dehumanizing effects of educational technology

• There are ways to humanize digital pedagogy to preserve our sense of humanity even while teaching & learning remotely
What do we mean when we talk about humanizing online education?

According to Dr. David Thornburg, one of the distinguishing features of humans is that we are storytellers.

For thousands of years, storytelling was how we taught.

He postulated that learning generally occurred in 3 types of settings: the campfire, the watering hole, & the cave.
• Teaching would take place in sacred places, typically around the fire or under the tree
• The storyteller would then share wisdom with students how then became storytellers to the next generation
• Nowadays, we would equate this to the classroom

• During trips to the waterhole, people would share information with their neighbors
• The watering hole thus became a place where we learned from our peers
• Nowadays, we would equate this to meeting in small groups, where each participant is both learner & teacher at the same time

• The cave is where we came in contact with only ourselves
• We all have times in learning any subject when we need to internalize that knowledge
• Nowadays, this would equate to independent study
Using the campfire strategy: To humanize online teaching is to create a situation where strangers can meet by the campfire, ...

... discuss what is important to them, & depart with the sense of connection & a feeling of community

- Nicole Schmidt (2017)
How do we humanize online learning?

- You can compare this task to building a house
- Your house needs structure in order to avoid collapsing
- Thus the pillars of your educational “house” become the pillars of your humanized online community
- Your online community has 4 major pillars, all of which are intertwined

Pillars:
- Trust
- Presence
- Empathy
- Awareness
Building trust & creating an inviting space

• Show your true self, including your personality
  – Send them an introductory video or message before the 1st class
• Use icebreakers & answer the icebreaker yourself, such as what is your favorite food or what food do you hate?
• Have “visiting” hours, as opposed to “office hours”
• Provide ways for students to make the course their own, such as
  – contributing content for the course
  – giving them choices of discussions in which to participate
  – making discussion topics interesting
Establishing Instructor Presence

• Tell anecdotes (stories are what make “campfires” special)

• Be involved
  • Check your course website regularly to monitor your students’ progress
  • Provide ongoing interaction through discussion posts, announcements, & emails
  • Example would be a “Motivational Monday” video with upbeat music (to grab their attention), a brief overview of the week’s assignments, & a motivational quote or pearl
  • You could also send a video postcard

• Students want instructors who care & who will motivate them the entire semester
Empathy is the ability to step into the shoes of another person, aiming to understand their feelings & perspectives, & to use that understanding to guide our actions.

Empathy requires that you see things through your students' eyes without judgment, that you be flexible, & that you support them towards their goals.

In other words, you are creating a safe space for them.
Improving online instructor empathy can be as simple as the following:

Admit your vulnerability:

I am human, I make mistakes. Let me know if you see one...
What are other ways to create an empathic environment?

Provide a “tips for online course success” prior to the beginning of the course

Make a personal connection at the start of class

Use a conversational tone

Promote interaction through careful facilitation in discussion boards

Use frequent formative assessment to ensure learning is occurring & that students understand the course structure

Answer student emails promptly & (if possible) personalize your email by using your student’s first name
Providing Instructor Awareness

Awareness is achieved by learning about who your students are & how you can support them.

Survey students at the start of term: what can I do to help you be successful in this course? Do you have personal challenges that might hinder you from successful completion of the course?

Conduct formative assessments

Practice giving warm, wise feedback that supports effort, ability, & action
Hello, students! After you have read our course syllabus, please take a few moments to complete this form. Your responses will come directly to me and will be kept confidential. I will use the information you provide to support your success this semester. Thanks so much for your time!

First name (what would you like me to call you): __________
Last name: __________
Your pronouns: __________
In one word, describe how you are feeling about this class: ______
What is the one thing that is most likely to interfere with your success in this class? __________
At this time, what is your academic goal? __________
What is one characteristic of a great online class? __________
Is there anything you would like to share or ask me at this point? __________

“The point isn’t to get it all right away. When you learn step by step, you are practicing, which strengthens your understanding. Look at how well you’ve approached the first part - you’ve got this! Let’s take a look at the second part to see how you approached it and where you might continue to build on your understanding.”
Your experience:
• What are things that you have done to make your online classrooms more welcoming?
• Please share your answers in the chat