

**Humanizing Online Assignments and Grading:
Just a Few Words Will Do**

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Abstract: There are ways to ensure that instructors can appear more human and ultimately play a supportive role in a student's engagement (and having more faith) in the online teaching-learning dynamic. This can be done through specific instructions for students to integrate part of who they are, what they have experienced, and the feedback provided to them, in a manner that concretely recognizes what the student has done in a course.

Key Words: Feedback; Humanize; Recognition; Online Engagement; Instructions

Although online teaching and learning can be limiting (Baum & McPherson, 2019), especially from an interactional perspective, there are ways to ensure that instructors can appear more human and ultimately play a significant pedagogical role in student engagement (and having more faith) in the online teaching-learning dynamic. This can be done through specific instructions for students to integrate their identity and lived experience into the course content. This integration personalizes the experience of an online course and may help students feel more engaged.

Recognizing the Human Connection in the Academic

One way to bring another level of value to both student and professor is to explicitly instruct students to humanize their understanding of what is being studied. This not only positions the student to make some personal connection to the ideas at hand, but the professor can recognize the learning intersection where theoretical/conceptual and personal meet when grading and providing feedback. For example, from an education content perspective, the instructions I use position students to respond in a personal way. I use this approach for upper-level undergraduate courses and some graduate-level discussion board assignments. After the students have been instructed for the first part of the assignment to use key terms or concepts in more academic sentences, the assignment asks students to write in a non-academic tone. Here are the instructions for that next step in the discussion board assignment:

Next, write **3-5 context sentences** that best *contextualize* or *illustrate/situate* EACH Key Term using less academic language. These sentences must still align with and represent an understanding of each key term somehow. When you contextualize, such as an example of “guided reading,” the sentence(s) can be based on a personal experience that you or family member had, something you observed in a classroom or school recently or from the past, something you read somewhere else, a discussion with a peer or professor, or maybe a movie scene or song lyrics that the Key Term reminds you of. Or, if you can’t refer to a personal experience, you can create your own scenario or made-up written illustration of what you think exemplifies the essence of that Key Term. For example, for a key term like “Guided Reading,” you can write in detail about your own experience with this teaching approach when you were in elementary school.

This approach can also be used with almost all other content areas, and at higher levels of complexity. For example, in math, even just asking a student to personalize problem-solving (Bernacki & Walkington, 2018) has been shown to improve performance in math learning. If a student is prompted to make a personal connection either to the content or the process of

learning the content, students feel more invested in that process. Nevertheless, the instructor plays a significant role in this part of their learning by ensuring that this integration of the personal happens by explicitly instructing students to do so, otherwise, students may not do it on their own.

Feedback to Prove and to Connect

Giving feedback online with proof that the student's work has been read is a way to humanize the instructor. Even if the student has produced high-quality work, and the assignment is being evaluated holistically where the instructor can just give the student an "A" that reflects their efforts, commenting on some aspect of their work provides another level of recognition and online presence of the instructor. I bring this up because I suspect many faculty struggle to keep up with grading, often the biggest issue with online teaching. I have, too. This approach to grading not only acknowledges my students' efforts by providing "evidence" that I am, indeed, reading their work, but also that I care about the work they produce. For example, I will choose by copying and pasting something key or insightful that the student has written in a paper or contributed on the discussion board. Then I comment on that specific work by writing the student 1-2 sentences about how important their thoughts were on that idea. Li et al (2022) found that feedback that integrates personal anecdotes or opinions integrated within an academic response has been found to "help students perceive the instructor as a real human" (p. 6). The student sees a human recognizing their work, and this humanization of the instructor can play a significant role on the level of student engagement in an online learning platform.

One thing I've learned about my students is that they appreciate (and I argue, need) this type of feedback on their work. I get emails from students even in the middle of the semester thanking me for this feedback. I know that when the student knows that their work is not being graded, they will do less quality work and not be as present as they can be in their study of the material. They will just check off the tasks required and will simply do the work, as opposed to engaging in learning the ideas in the content. When I ask students to integrate who they are and what they've experienced in their understanding of the material being studied, their work seems

more genuine, and there is an indication of more authentic learning and retention of the material. The substance of their work reflects better conceptual understanding.

Providing some semblance of substantive, humanized feedback and comments is a form of supporting students by recognizing the work they have done and what was involved in producing it. When we do not give this type of feedback or comments on the work that students do, we are failing to acknowledge who they are as students and their efforts to be and become better students through their learning – the desired learning outcome for all classes and coursework in higher education, virtual or not. Their work is an extension of their identities as students. Many of my students have worked hard to do the work they are asked to do, so I feel that I am obligated to acknowledge their efforts and work, especially because I know that it's a way to support them as students in this time of challenges in mental and emotional well-being. We support our students by acknowledging their work. Providing some feedback on their work sends this message to them: I know you are there, and I see and know who you are in the work you created in the course.

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