# Online Learning through the Lens of Relational Humanity

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**Abstract:**

Due to the pandemic, one of the most transformational shifts in decades occurred in the field of education. A silver lining of the devastating worldwide pandemic is that this need for connection and relational humanity was highlighted and individuals witnessed the need to prioritize family and relationships with one another. Relational humanity is defined as: "Purposeful deepening of relationships as humanitarian [action in] showing others that we care about their well-being and welfare as fellow human beings" (Eadens & Eadens, 2021). Efforts in relational humanity manifested differently from faculty to faculty member, but for the purposes of this research, responses from students in Dr. Danielle Eadens' class centered around her interactions in an undergraduate capstone class reflective of a conversation about their final projects that also included the question, *"As a human being in the middle of a pandemic, how are you doing?"*. Over a two year period (Spring 2020-Spring 2022) working with many students (N=904), Dr. Danielle Eadens gathered information from several students. Emergent themes and patterns were viewed and analyzed through the lens of the question: *"What stood out to students in creating an online environment that builds relational humanity?"* In this current study, the language from the sources were informally coded into four repeated themes of textual evidence: Professor focus on individual's student success (n=16), Caring Professor (n=14), Professor's understanding and empathy (n=12), and Professor's focus on individual's post-graduation success (n=8).

# Introduction

*In the midst of the pandemic, I sit at my home office desk and smile at my screen as my student joins me virtually, looking nervous for a one-on-one meeting with their online professor, but with a forced smile upon their face. I start the individual consultation regarding their final project with, "Before we start talking about your capstone project, I want to check in. As a human being in the middle of a pandemic, how are you doing?" and then smile and wait silently while the student gathers their thoughts to respond. Usually, the student pauses, their forced smile softening as they share parts of their lives I never would have known without that purposeful effort towards relational humanity and human connection. One student cries as she tells me how she lost her dad to COVID a month ago with a large portrait of the patriarch with her son in the background. We talk about how proud he would be of her as she graduates this semester. Many here in the Orlando hospitality industry share how they were laid off because of the pandemic and the financial struggles that come along with that unexpected burden of changing careers. Other students celebrate unexpected job opportunities, surprise pregnancies, and adoptions of pets, sometimes even complete with a shared visit from each of our pandemic cat adoptions on camera. (D.M. Eadens)*

Due to the pandemic, the most transformational shift in decades occurred in the field of education. All higher education faculty had to pivot their courses online and students all around the world ended up with vastly different educational and human experiences. The quality of these experiences depended heavily on institutional support and the faculty member leading the course. There was tremendous variability in the quality and experiences for faculty and students. Digital divides and access issues were exacerbated and courses with the same name may have looked very different from institution to institution and course to course.

## Relational Humanity

The connection between faculty and student matters. This need for human connection exists through all modalities, global crises, and cultures. "In the midst of the difficulty and tragedy, the need for connection and relational humanity became even more important within and outside education" (Eadens & Eadens, 2021). A silver lining of the devastating worldwide pandemic is that this need for connection and relational humanity was highlighted and individuals saw the need to prioritize family and relationships with one another. Relational humanity is defined as: "Purposeful deepening of relationships as humanitarian [action in] showing others that we care about their well-being and welfare as fellow human beings" (Eadens & Eadens, 2021). This need for connection and deeper relationships between faculty and students is well supported in the literature. The relationship is identified as part of effective online learning design, especially within courses that emphasize cultural competence and social emotional learning.

The need for connection and relationship between faculty and student is well documented in the literature as a part of effective online learning design, particularly in courses with outcomes around social emotional learning and cultural competence. Relational humanity is a pillar of effective and inclusive online instruction in higher education. Efforts in relational humanity manifested differently from faculty

to faculty member, but for the purposes of this research, responses from students in Dr. Danielle Eadens' class centered around her interactions in an undergraduate capstone class reflective of the aforementioned *"As a human being in the middle of a pandemic, how are you doing?"* discussion.

## Student Perceptions in a Capstone Class

While not directly surveying students, Dr. Eadens examined sentiments from the Student Perceptions of Instruction, emails, and an informal feedback survey at the end of the class every semester. Over a two year period (Spring 2020-Spring 2022) working with many students (N=904), Dr. Danielle Eadens gathered information from several (n=30) surrounding this question. Originally not intending to do a study, over that time period, emergent themes and patterns could be viewed and felt naturally. Out of habit and caring, comments were examined through the lens of the question: *"What stood out to students in creating an online environment that builds relational humanity?"* Being sympathetic to the student perspective and experience, it was emotionally moving and deserved unpacking. With a post hoc view, it was clear that students' perceptions appeared to be somewhat similar. An informal and objective systematic approach was found to help crystalize the patterns. But, the question became what approach was best.

Scientifically, the most closely related methodology was qualitative. Initially, the idea was to use a Grounded Theory (GT) approach. Eadens' (2012) description of GT seemed appropriate enough. Eadens' (2012) claimed, "Most definitions agree and portray the ethnographic approach of GT as more of a systematic qualitative research methodology involving the creation of theory from observational data" (p. 2). However, after further contemplating the practicality of the information, it gradually became apparent that the most appropriate design needed was one that most resembles what Starks and Trinidad (2007) refer to as *Discourse Analysis* (DA). Their article compared the qualitative analyses methods of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory, as shown in this figure.

While DA focuses on the language, "it is through the shared, mutually agreed on use of language that meaning is created" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374). In DA data collecting, capturing the spoken and written words are important in order to fully understand the context of the overt meanings and subtle innuendos associated with real emotions from participants' lives and experiences. DA requires decontextualization of words and then recontextualization. "During decontextualization the analyst separates data from the original context of individual cases and assigns codes to units of meaning" and "In recontextualization he or she examines the codes for patterns and then reintegrates, organizes, and reduces the data around central themes and relationships drawn across all the cases and narratives" (p. 1375). In this current study, the language from the sources were informally coded into four repeated themes of textual evidence with some comments counting in multiple categories: Professor focus on individual's student success (n=16), Caring Professor (n=14), Professor's understanding and empathy (n=12), and Professor's focus on individual's post-graduation success (n=8).

These themes grew organically from rereading the purpose of the study question, assumptions, notes and interpretations, hunches and ideas, and repeated reflections about the information. Dr. D.M. Eadens maintained her perspective in the process and her position and role to listen and empathize with the messages coming from students. While the process used in this case was not in accordance with the most rigorous, pure, and strict analytical procedures for analysis, the trustworthiness of the qualitative

work can still be subjective. In fact, "Analytic credibility depends on the coherence of the argument: Readers will judge the trustworthiness of the process by how the analyst uses evidence…" (p. 1376).

## Relational Humanity with the other Dr. Eadens

The other author of this paper, Dr. Daniel Eadens, implemented practices towards relational humanity during the pandemic with his graduate educational leadership students. Doctoral students working as administrators and teachers in local schools filled his Zoom classes and he implemented time in the start of these synchronous courses for sharing and fellowship amongst professionals during a very stressful time. During roll call, doing so allowed students to release some of that stress as he sympathized and facilitated connections and support from and among colleagues and students. He simply asked how each were holding up during the pandemic. Doctoral students were given his personal cell phone number and encouraged to call whenever they needed at any time - day or night. He spent extra time counseling each student who needed additional guidance or support on weekends, evenings, and whenever students needed to be told how to use SPSS to run a Correlation, ANOVA, Regression or simply that they could do it and that he looked forward to the day he could call them *Doctor*. He engaged in relational humanity and, in turn, modeled what it looks like when a leader does that for their constituents, whether they be university students, K-12 faculty or students at a K-12 school.

## Online Learning through the Lens of Relational Humanity

In this capstone course and other well designed online courses, students establish connections with faculty & each other; course material is made relevant to daily lives with a focus on student engagement; access to care support services is present in the course and use of services encouraged. In the capstone course, all faculty who teach it engage in purposeful action to show students they care about their schooling and beyond - establishing relational humanity in the classroom. The course is universally designed for all learners. Most importantly, the mindset of faculty is focused on creating an online environment that facilitates mastery of content AND builds relationships.

In looking at online learning through the lens of relational humanity, this paper explores elements of effective and inclusive online course design through the lens of relational humanity. High quality online course design is organized whereby faculty value student time and invest time in making the course easy to navigate so students can spend valuable time with the content and not trying to find materials. Content must be updated, relevant, current, and the technology must work and be easy to navigate for students.

Every high quality online class should clearly show the professor's touch and personalization and evidence that the faculty are human too and want to build a relationship with students. Faculty must customize the course to meet the needs and interests of students in the (virtual) room, valuing their interests and perspectives. Assessment includes higher order thinking, reflection, and offers multiple means of assessment whereby students can self-select the best way to show mastery of concepts based on their talents and strengths. Faculty should want to hear student thought processes and want to help students engage with the material at a mastery level.

All students should feel welcome and represented in the course material where appropriate. The first step is simple accessibility whereby the course is accessible and universally designed. In looking at Universal Design for Learning through the lens of relational humanity, breaking down the elements of UDL, we can see what it tells students about the faculty perspective. Faculty designing the course to include *Multiple Means of Engagement* to include recruiting interest, supporting persistence, and facilitating self-regulated learning tells students that faculty care about students' interests, engagement, learning, and that they will encourage persistence.

Design that includes *Multiple Means of Representation* whereby the faculty members ensure access to content and materials for all students, that the students understand language and symbols and can make sense of the material in meaningful ways offers a perspective of what faculty value. It shows that faculty value the variability in which students prefer and need to access information, accommodate students' unique needs, and ensure that students make sense of the material and see its application to their lives and experiences. Online faculty who integrate *Multiple Means of Action & Expression* into their courses give students options for the process of learning, multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding, and integrate developing and achieving personal learning goals. This shows students that the faculty value the ways in which students present information, encourages them to demonstrate understanding in ways that best show mastery of course material and helps students customize learning to best meet personal learning goals.

## Conclusion

In the place of a traditional conclusion, this paper concludes with some of the comments used in the analysis as evidence of the power of relationships and relational humanity:

> *I also just want you to know that I never thought I would be able to do any of this, and your classes boosted my confidence to even apply at all. … thank you. Your classes really made a difference for me.*

> *As far as how the class was set up and how it progressed I think you have done a great job, but you are the key. I have only had a few professors who I felt truly cared about me as a person and you were one of them.*

> *…We discussed how I've been throughout the pandemic, which was thoughtful and indicative of a caring professor...*

> *You have created an environment that helps students grow and allows for diverse interactions where learning is assisted by actually doing something that is relevant to real world actions…. Thank you Dr. Eadens! … In the 11 years I have spent within higher education, it has been unfortunately rare to find professors with the passion and drive you display towards a subject and helping students succeed.*

> *Professor Eadens was a great help. I haven't had many professors who really take the time to schedule time with each student and guide them beyond the classroom. I understand the nature of the class and what her 'job" is, but she was better than I expected.*

*This experience… illustrated to me empathetic leadership, specifically from the encouragement and affirmation I felt from the professor. As a requirement for this course, I had to have a phone call with the professor. Worried out of my mind and dealing with grief at the time the professor reached out on an emotional level and motivated me to complete this project at my own pace. As the figurative boss in this scenario, the professor had influenced the worker positively through empathetic leadership.*

*… I want to thank you for making me feel like my success is important to you. There aren't many professors like you and I'm truly grateful to have taken your course. Working 60+ hours a week made it fairly challenging for me to keep up with my assignments. …You've given students, like myself, the opportunity to succeed. Although it's been a hectic semester, I truly enjoyed the course and feel like I've gained valuable lessons that I can and will use throughout my life. It's professors like you that make an impact and leave a lasting impression on students…*

*Dr. Eadens is the reason I enjoyed my last year of college. She is on your side as a student, ensures that you are setup to succeed and does everything in her power to create a class environment that helps students do well, regardless of what they're going through. She sincerely wanted to see students succeed this semester, and it showed in her engagement with the class.*

# References

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