

Humanizing Your Online Course: Getting Started

Welcome to the Special Summer 2022 Series about Humanizing Online Courses!

In our newsletter series, we will explore practical tips and best practices to create a welcoming and inclusive learning environment in your online course. What do we mean by “humanizing” and why is it important for online learning? Humanizing applies learning science and culturally responsive teaching to online teaching & learning ([Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020](#)). Humanizing is all about bringing the *human element* into our online classrooms to build connections, increase engagement, and support meaningful learning. Humanizing reflects inclusive and equitable teaching practices, and relates directly to [Mason’s Task Force for Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence](#). Through basic elements which apply the four interwoven humanizing principles of empathy, awareness, presence, and trust, you can support an inclusive & equitable learning environment in which all students feel that they belong and are welcomed, valued, and respected. In our summer newsletter series, we’ll be focusing on the work of Pacansky-Brock and her colleagues, who created [the framework](#) for humanizing online courses.

In this first issue, we will provide tips and examples for **getting started**, *i.e.*, how to make your students feel welcomed, by creating a humanized home page in your online course, and by reaching out to your students prior to the start of your online course.

WHAT IS A "HUMANIZED" ONLINE COURSE?



STUDENTS FEEL WELCOME



Reach out to students with encouraging and inclusive welcome to course.

STUDENTS LEARN IN MULTIPLE WAYS



Use videos and multiple means for students to learn content and for course communication.

STUDENTS FEEL SEEN & HEARD



Get to know your students, and give them a voice in their learning.

STUDENTS DEVELOP GROWTH MINDSET



Provide warm, wise, and constructive feedback to support learning & growth.

Follow Humanizing Principles of Empathy, Awareness, Presence & Trust

[View the “What is a Humanized Online Course?” Infographic Online](#)

Tips for Getting Started with “Humanizing” Your Online Course

Reduce barriers and feelings of isolation of students in your online course by creating a welcoming environment. It’s critical to make this happen during the “high opportunity zone” of an online course, *i.e.*, the week prior to the start of instruction and the first week of your course! Students need to know what’s expected of them in your course; that they are welcomed, valued, and respected; and that they are seen and heard.

Here we share two practical ways to welcome your students: (1) **Humanized Course Home Page**; and (2) **Course Welcome Message** (in form of email, infographic, or “liquid syllabus”). Note that the practical tips and best practices shared here are suggested “starting points” for humanizing your online course. We recommend that you try, adapt, and apply these tips and practices to your own online courses and online teaching.

(1) Create a Humanized Home Page in Your Online Course

The very first thing your students will see and experience in your/their online course is the home (landing) page. Make sure to create and present a warm & encouraging welcome! A humanized home page signals to students, “You are Welcome Here”. Let students know something about you (instructor) and that you support their learning and success. Also inform students about how to navigate the online course, generally what’s expected of them in the course, and how to get started!

Humanized home page may include:

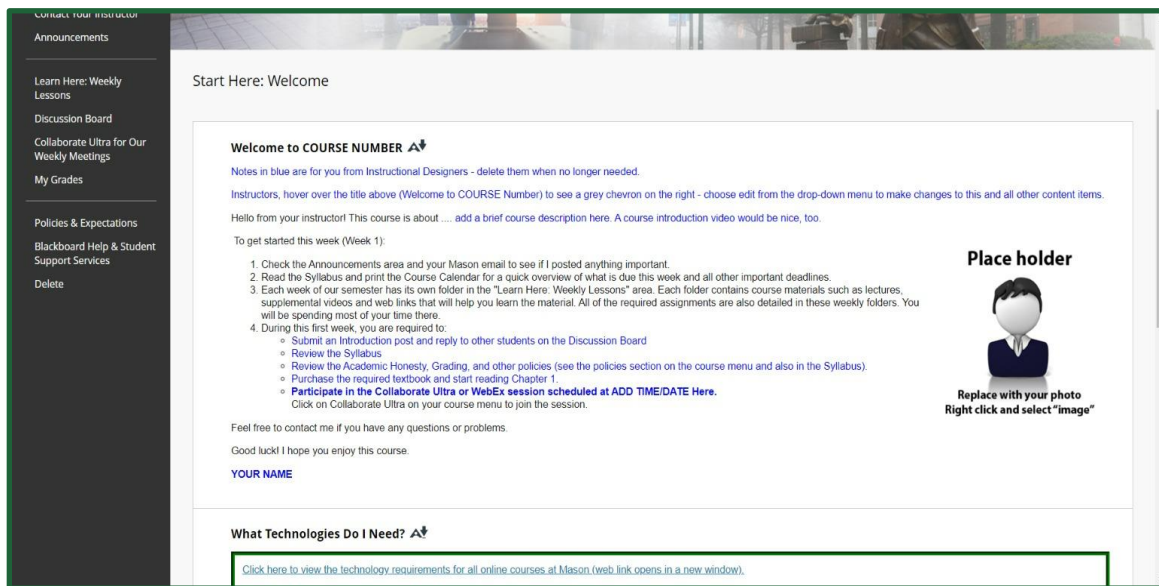
- **Customized course banner**
 - [Create a course banner](#) with your course section, number, and title to provide a unique welcome, a personal touch, basic information for your course.
- **Welcome message from instructor**
 - Include encouraging and inclusive language, a brief & friendly bio, your photo, and/or record a brief video introducing yourself.
- **Course orientation video**
 - Help your students get off to a good start with an orientation video. Take your students through a tour exploring your online course, walking them through important elements. Record a narrated video using [Kaltura Capture Desktop Recording Tool](#) and share on course home page.
- **Steps for getting started OR link to Start Here information**
 - Include specific (numbered) steps for how to get started, or direct students to “Start Here” page in the course.
 - Sometimes instructors will combine Welcome and Start Here information together on same page, with link to Welcome/Start Here in course menu.
- **Link or directions to syllabus and course schedule**
 - Make sure to direct students to the syllabus, course schedule, and other important information about course requirements and policies.

Tips for Getting Started with “Humanizing” Your Online Course (continued)

To help create a welcoming online course home page, use Stearns Center online course template!

- See screenshot of our template for Start Here: Welcome page below.
- You may download this template from Stearns Center website (Teaching Online> How to Access a Sample Blackboard Template?) at: <https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/online-teaching/>

Figure. 1. Screenshot of Stearns Center Template for Start Here: Welcome Page in Blackboard



TIP: Take a fresh look at the home page of your online course, from a student’s perspective. If you’ve already taught online - review your welcome page. If you are new to online teaching, make sure you address these questions!

- Does the home page use encouraging, inclusive, hopeful, and friendly language?
- Is it clear to the student how to get started in the course?
- Does the student know what books, resources, and technology tools are required for the course?
- Does the student learn something about you (instructor), professionally and personally?
- Is there clear information about how to contact you (instructor)?

Tips for Getting Started with “Humanizing” Your Online Course (continued)

(2) Welcome Your Students Before Your Course Begins

As mentioned, the “high opportunity zone” for making your students feel welcome in an online course occurs in the week prior to the start of instruction (Week 0) and during the first week (Week 1). This “opportunity zone” for “kindness cues of social inclusion” is shown in the image (Figure 2) below.

Figure 2. “High opportunity zone” in Weeks 0 and 1 of online course (from <https://brocansky.com/humanizing/infographic2>, CC BY-NC 4.0)



We recommend that you reach out to your students **before** the course begins. Through a pre-semester communication, you can welcome your students, introduce the course, and describe the schedule & routines for your online course.

This welcome communication can take different forms. You can prepare a regular email message; you can create a course welcome infographic; you can prepare a “liquid syllabus”. A welcome communication (in whichever format you choose) will let students know that you (instructor) will be a partner in their learning. You also prepare your students for online learning, setting the stage for their success.

Email: What to include in a welcome email to your students? The Stearns Center has [tips and sample template](#) for welcome or “start-up” message. You also can find additional examples of what you might include in a welcome message [here](#).

Infographic: You can use templates found in Canva, Piktochart, PowerPoint or other infographic tools to prepare a colorful, welcoming, and engaging infographic. In the infographic, introduce the course, yourself, and your role as instructor in the course. Make sure you mention that you will support and guide student learning & success! You then can email this infographic to your students prior to the start of the course.

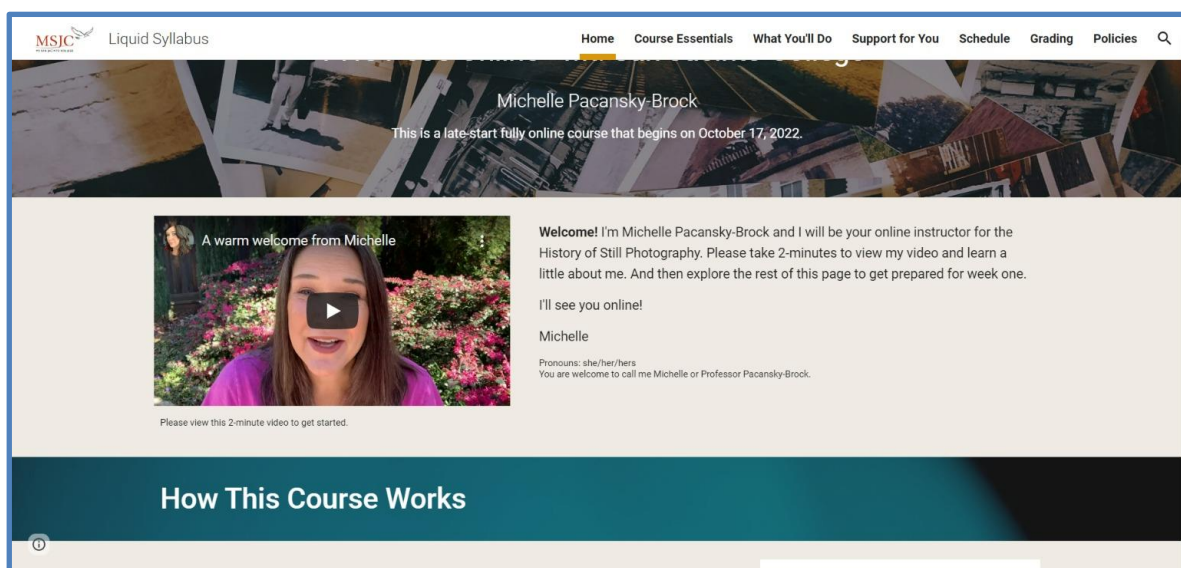
“Liquid Syllabus”: This is an element (developed by [Pacansky-Brock](#)) specifically to “humanize” online courses. You can think of it as the “next generation” of the standard email welcome message, but presenting the same information in an engaging, digital format. Liquid Syllabus is found on website (external to LMS), and provides brief & friendly course overview. A Liquid Syllabus website may be created using WordPress, Wix, Google sites, etc.

Tips for Getting Started with “Humanizing” Your Online Course (continued)

What is a “Liquid Syllabus”, and what makes for a welcoming Liquid Syllabus?
(from Pacansky-Brock, 2014, 2017, 2020; Pacansky-Brock *et al.* 2021)

- A Liquid Syllabus is a publicly available, accessible, mobile-friendly website.
- Students open this website without having to log into LMS. The Liquid Syllabus is available to students before the online course begins. The website is fully accessible.
- Since many students use their mobile devices these days, the Liquid Syllabus is designed to be viewed on mobile device.
- **Liquid Syllabus includes:** A brief welcome video from instructor; a “learning pact” that lets students know course expectations (of them and what they can expect of their instructor); how to get started in the online course; when they can access the course; and what’s due in week one. Tips and links to resources for success may be shared as well. Note that the Liquid Syllabus is written in welcoming, encouraging, inclusive language.
- See example of [Liquid Syllabus \(for Pacansky-Brock’s course at Mt. San Jacinto College, CA\)](#). Screenshot of opening page is shown in Figure 3 (below).

Figure 3. Screenshot of Liquid Syllabus for PHOT 530 Online • Mt. San Jacinto College.



Resource for Creating a “Liquid Syllabus”

You can learn how to create your own Liquid Syllabus through this self-paced, public Canvas course that will walk you through the steps to create a Liquid Syllabus:

- [Creating a Liquid Syllabus](#)

Getting Started with Humanizing Your Online Course: Next Steps!

In this newsletter issue, you've learned that **the initial welcome** from instructor to students is critical for humanizing an online course. As you prepare your upcoming courses, make sure to create a welcoming Home Page, using the tips and template provided. Also prepare and send a Welcome Message to your students the week before the course begins, using the format that works best for you, whether that be a regular (standard) email, message with infographic (image or PDF), or message with link to a "Liquid Syllabus" website that you've created. What's important is that your students hear from you about your commitment to their learning, what they may expect from you & what's expected of them, how to get started with the course, and tips and resources for success. Use the various examples presented in this newsletter to help you create your own personalized message, that is customized for students in your online course!

Need Additional Guidance? Please contact Dr. Darlene Smucny, Assistant Director, Digital Learning, Stearns Center, for guidance and assistance for humanizing your online course. Her email is: dsmucny@gmu.edu.

Cited Resources

- Pacansky-Brock, M. (2014, August 13). [The Liquid Syllabus: Are you ready?](#), [blog post].
- Pacansky-Brock, M. (2017). *Best practices for teaching with emerging technologies*, (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pacansky-Brock, M., Smedshammer, M., & Vincent-Layton, K. (2020). [Humanizing online teaching to equitize higher education](#). *Current Issues in Education*, 21(2).
- Pacansky-Brock, M. (2021). [The liquid syllabus: An anti-racist teaching element](#). *Colleague 2 Colleague Magazine*, 1(15).

Contact Us!

Office of Digital Learning | Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning
Phone: 703-993-6200 | Email: stearns@gmu.edu
Suite 412 Innovation Hall, Fairfax Campus
George Mason University