GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY | Digital Learning
Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning

Humanizing Your Online Course: Getting to Know Your Students

"When teaching online, each name on the screen must be recognized as a real human with a story" (Pacansky-Brock *et al.*, 2020).

In this second issue of our summer newsletter series, we'll continue to explore practical tips to create a welcoming and inclusive learning environment in your online course. When you *humanize* your online course, you build your teaching intentionally on framework of the four interwoven humanizing principles of *trust*, *presence*, *awareness*, and *empathy*. In online courses, students want to be seen, heard, and included, *i.e.*, recognized, respected, and valued as individuals. Students need to feel that they belong and that you (instructor) recognize and support them to achieve their goals. When/if students feel invisible, isolated, and not engaged in online courses, they then face barriers & obstacles to their learning and academic success. During the "high opportunity zone" at start of your course, you need to apply practices and strategies to "see and hear" your students, in order to build positive rapport & trust with your online students.

Here we share two examples of best practices for getting to know your online students (from Pacansky-Brock's eight humanizing elements): (1) **Getting-To-Know-You Survey**; and (2) **Self-Affirming Icebreaker**. Through these activities, you can get to know more about your students, how to support them, and letting them know that their values and experiences matter.

View the "Humanizing Your Online Course: Strategies for Getting to Know Your Students" Infographic Online

Tips for Getting to Know Your Students in Your "Humanized" Online Course

Here we share two practical ways to get to know your students: (1) **Getting-To-Know-You Survey**; and (2) **Self-Affirming Icebreaker**. Note that the practical tips and best practices shared here are suggested "starting points" for humanizing your online course. We encourage you to try, adapt, and apply these tips and practices to your own online courses and online teaching, finding out what works best for you and your students.

Start with these practices for building rapport and trust with your online students particularly during the "*high opportunity zone*" which occurs in the week prior to the start of instruction (Week 0) and during the first week (Week 1) of your online course.

1) Create "Getting-To-Know-You" Survey in Your Online Course

Why? To create a humanized and personalized learning experience online, you'll need to get to know your students -- who they are, their experiences, skills, goals, and aspirations, as well as their expectations for the course. To support your online learners, and to make their online learning experience engaging and truly effective. you will need to know more about them! Getting to know your students sends them the message that you will do what you can to support them, and that you care about their learning & success.

How? How to get to know your students as individuals, not making assumptions about them and/or viewing them as stereotypes? Collect personalized data from each student through a confidential online survey, administered at the start (or just prior) to the course, during the *"high opportunity zone"*. By making this survey a low-stakes requirement for the course, students will be more inclined to complete it.

What questions to include in the survey? The questions you include depend on the information that's important for student success in the course. You'll need to know basic information (name, major, etc.). You'll also need to include some targeted questions about each student's expectations, goals, and aspirations for the course, as well as for their studies. What's their experience with online courses? What's their experience with the discipline & course content? How/what is their access to technology and internet?

Other questions to consider. You also can add a survey question to get to know your students on a more personal level. You can check out question ideas from List of 365 Table Topic Questions.

Ever since the pandemic, in my own online courses, a question I've included in Getting-To-Know-You Surveys has been "*What's one good thing that happened to you this week or what are you most grateful for?*" That question has helped me get to know my online students, their challenges, and perspectives!

Tips for Getting to Know Your Students in Your "Humanized" Online Course (continued)

Here's a list of possible questions for Getting-To-Know-You Survey. Ask students to fill in information, and also can present them with some questions in multiple-choice format (as shown below in these examples, adapted from **Pacansky-Brock**). The specific questions you include depend upon what you need to know to better support learning of your students!

Instructions for Survey (sample language)

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 sharing your information with me!

Basic Information

- First Name: What would you like me to call you?
- Last Name
- Your Preferred Pronouns

About You

- Which of the following describes you? (check all that apply)
    - This is my first semester of college
    - I am the first in my family to attend college.
    - This is my first time taking an online class.
    - I just transferred to Mason.
    - I am active-duty military.
    - I work more than 20 hours per week.
    - I am a caretaker for at least one person.
    - Other (please state in a few words)
- What is your major?
- At this time, what is your academic goal? What is one thing that you are looking forward to in this course?
- What is one thing that you are worried about in this course?
- What is the one thing that is most likely to interfere with your learning & success in this class?
- What do you find makes for a great online course?
- Please indicate anything else you'd like to share or ask me at this point.

For more info about survey questions, see **Getting to Know You Survey** at https://brocansky.com/humanizing/student-info

Tips for Getting to Know Your Students in Your "Humanized" Online Course (continued)

How to Create the Online Survey? There are various options of survey tools, including Microsoft Forms, Google Forms, Qualtrics Survey, and Blackboard Survey. For Microsoft Forms survey, you will use your Mason Office 365 account; for Google Forms Survey, you will create/use Google account; for Qualtrics Survey, you will need a Qualtrics account (check with your Department); and Blackboard Surveys are created directly within your online course. Note that with Google Forms, you can view the survey results in Google Sheets and download into Microsoft Excel file. For technical help with these survey tools, please contact Mason ITS Courses Support (courses@gmu.edu).

Whichever tool you select for the survey, please make sure that you provide your students with clear instructions for how to submit the survey, and let them know that only you will see their responses. Once the data are collected, make sure that you review and use the data to strategically connect individual students with learning support and to adapt your teaching throughout your course.

(2) Start Off with Self-Affirming Icebreaker in Your Online Course

Why? Icebreakers are a great way to begin building community in an online course. Using icebreakers at the start of the course will help students to get to know each other, and also to get to know you (instructor). Building a sense of community will provide students with support and motivation throughout the semester, and make them feel less isolated as online learners. Icebreakers also help to build an environment of trust in an online course.

What's a "Humanized" Icebreaker? To humanize your icebreaker, plan a "self-affirming" icebreaker, which sends the message to students that *their values and experiences matter*. Have your students participate in a low-stakes ice breaker that encourages sharing values and allowing for connections. Humanized icebreakers promote belonging and reduce uncertainty & stress (Pacansky-Brock, 2021).

Keep in mind that the Icebreaker is a class activity, which all students will participate and see! This contrasts with the Getting-to-Know-You Survey, which only you will see.

Questions to Consider when Planning/Creating Your Icebreaker (adapted from Conrad & Donaldson, 2011):

- Is activity fun & non-threatening?
- Is activity quick to complete, yet thoughtful & insightful?
- Is it person-focused (but not TOO personal)?
- Does it require students to read each other's postings?
- Does it require student to find something in common with others in the class?
- Does it require imagination and openness?

Tips for Getting to Know Your Students in Your "Humanized" Online Course (continued)

What are Some Examples of Self-Affirming Icebreakers?

Sharing an object, photograph, or memory with special meaning: Have each student describe an object, photo, or memory which has special meaning to them, perhaps focusing on how it relates to their educational goals or aspirations. This icebreaker also can be customized to relate to a particular discipline or topic.

"Sharing the Story of Your Name": Students are invited to share the personal story of their name. Name can be first name, family name, or nickname. What does their name mean; how/why did they get this name? This icebreaker will result in personalized postings, since each individual student has their own unique story!

"One Word": Invite students to think of one word that best describes themselves or their life. Each student enters their word and name in subject line of a Blackboard discussion posting, and then within the posting, will explain why they chose that word. To further build community, you can create a word cloud (using tool such as Mentimeter) with all of the "One Words" shared by students. You then can share the word cloud with the class, so that students can identify & discuss any patterns and commonalities (see sample word cloud in ***Fig. 1*** below).

Figure 1: Example of Word Cloud from "One Word" Icebreaker Activity. Created using Mentimeter.

Note that all of these examples of icebreakers can be easily done in a Blackboard discussion forum.

To add another "humanizing" dimension to these icebreakers, encourage your students to post an image or brief audio or video (using Padlet, Harmonize, or Kaltura) to share their story. It's also important that students reply to each other about their postings, to build connections and community. If you have questions about any of these tools, please contact Stearns Center or ITS Courses Support.

Humanizing Your Online Course: Next Steps!

In this newsletter issue, you've learned that online students want to be "seen and heard" by their instructor. *I.e.*, known, recognized & respected as individuals. As you prepare your upcoming online courses, make sure to make plans for how you will get to know your online students. We recommend that you create a Getting-To-Know-You Survey, and use that data to plan how to better support your online students. Also prepare a Humanized, Self-Affirming Icebreaker for students to connect and build community during the critical "opportunity zone" at the start of the online course.

Always keep in mind the four interwoven humanizing principles of *trust*, *presence*, *awareness*, and *empathy!*

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

- Conrad, R.M. & Donaldson, J. A. (2011). Online Icebreakers. Chapter 5 in: *Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction* (Updated ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. *[Book & eBook available from Mason Libraries]*
- Pacansky-Brock, M. (2021). Self-affirming Icebreakers. Blog. (January 2, 2021). **https://brocansky.com/2021/01/self-affirming-icebreakers.html**
- Pacansky-Brock, M., Smedshammer, M., & Vincent-Layton, K. (2020). **Humanizing online teaching to equitize higher education.** *Current Issues in Education*, *21*(2).

Contact Us!

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