

Humanizing Within a Cohort-Based, Online Professional Doctoral Program

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In this article we extend the idea of humanizing an online course to humanizing within a cohort-based online doctoral program. We provide examples of humanizing through student agency, faculty presence and peer presence across the main stages of doctoral work in the United States: transition and adjustment, coursework and the process of attaining candidacy and the dissertation process. We conclude the article with recommendations for others wishing to humanize across an online doctoral program.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of and strategies for humanizing online courses has received considerable attention in recent years, although the concept has been in existence for at least two decades (Weiss, 2000). Many key elements of humanized online courses align with the idea of integrating cognitive, social and teaching presence in the Community of Inquiry model (CoI; Garrison et al., 1999). While different authors describe humanized online courses in slightly different ways, all address the importance of human connection and belonging as central in an online environment where all students feel welcomed and free to learn.

Recent scholarship has focused on humanizing online courses for a diverse population of undergraduate students (Li et al., 2022; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020) especially as related to STEM content (Pacansky-Brock, et al., 2023). Focusing on the course level makes sense in undergraduate programs where students take courses in different areas and with different peers as they complete their degrees. However, as faculty who work in a cohort-based, online professional doctorate, we set out to humanize our program given that our students engage in shared experiences over an extended period.

COHORT-BASED, ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM

We offer an online EdD in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Educational Technology that is designed for professionals interested in solving problems of practice in their workplace using theory and research (Kumar & Dawson, 2018). Our program enrolls full-time professionals working in diverse educational technology contexts (higher education, K–12 schools, virtual schools, corporations, non-profit, etc.) and disciplines (e.g., math, foreign languages, libraries, nursing, medicine, instructional design, etc.) in the United States and overseas. Given that our students are successful professionals who are fully embedded in their workplace contexts and typically at ages where they also have numerous personal responsibilities in addition to the academic responsibilities of new doctoral students, we recognized early on that humanizing throughout the program is necessary for their success.

HUMANIZING ACROSS A COHORT-BASED, ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM

Li et al. (2022) identified three elements that transcend most frameworks for humanizing online courses: student agency, instructor presence, and peer presence. Student agency aligns closely with the tenets of andragogy (Knowles, 1984) and requires that students are engaged in activities that give them autonomy and a sense of purpose, as well as content that is timely and relevant to their lives. Instructor presence comes from the CoI model and involves instructors being present in online courses and connecting socially and emotionally with students. We have extended this idea to Program Faculty Presence because we humanize across the program and not just within individual courses. Peer presence aligns with social presence in the CoI and involves students getting to know their peers professionally and, in many cases personally, so they feel like they are interacting with real humans.

We found Tinto's (1993) three stages of (1) transition and adjustment, (2) coursework and attaining candidacy and (3) dissertation a useful lens to ensure we humanize across the program and not simply within individual courses. The transition and adjustment stage involves students acclimating to the expectations and rigors of doctoral work. The second stage involves coursework that prepares students to attain doctoral candidacy status and the final stage is the dissertation process. By considering these key elements across the three stages of doctoral work, we identified specific strategies to enable us to humanize across the program (See Table 1).

HUMANIZING STRATEGIES THROUGH ALL THREE PHASES

STUDENT AGENCY

Student agency involves sharing program rationale, including student feedback and voice, incorporating student choices, and student regulation of their learning (Li et al., 2022). When students are admitted to our online doctoral program, we share our book that was based on the program's first three iterations (Kumar & Dawson, 2018) with them—to explain the rationale behind the program design

Table 1. Humanizing Strategies across the Three Phases of Doctoral Study

	Transition and Adjustment	Coursework and Attaining Candidacy	Dissertation
Student Agency	Cohort-based but individualized (e.g., area of specialization)	Embedded in professional practice	Autonomy within guidelines
Program Faculty Presence	Orientation; Individualized advising	Course design, collaboration & continuity	Mentoring
Peer Presence	Regular Zoom meetings; inquiry groups	Regular Zoom meetings; Student-driven virtual spaces; inquiry groups	Support groups; connection to previous students

and communicate how student feedback from previous cohorts contributed to their curriculum and activities. The online program is cohort-based, i.e., students take all their courses with their cohort allowing for the creation of community, but the curriculum is designed to address the needs and interests of each student. All activities and assignments are individualized to make them relevant to professional students and their contexts.

During their first semester, students choose an area of specialization that reflects *their* interests and addresses problems related to educational technology in *their* professional practice. They articulate, develop, and refine this area across various courses and seminars during the first two years leading up to candidacy, by completing small projects where they identify a problem within their area of specialization, collect data, and learn from the results. During this process, students make decisions based on theory and research learned in the curriculum, as well as their professional expertise and experience. This culminates in a dissertation aligned with program dissertation guidelines but driven by a problem of practice and research relevant to *their* professional context and growth. Throughout the program, student feedback is solicited and incorporated to improve the learning experience for the present and future cohorts. We gather data using anonymous student surveys during the program about program curriculum and community-building and collaborate with researchers who do not work in the program to conduct interviews with program graduates about the dissertation phase (Kumar, 2014; Kumar & Coe, 2017). Cohorts are generous with their feedback and reinforce the culture of feedback in the pro-

gram because we share our program iterations in our publications (e.g., our book).

PROGRAM FACULTY PRESENCE

A 2-day on-campus orientation is held at the beginning of the first semester of the online doctoral program, that includes ice-breaker activities and multiple interactions where students as well as program faculty get to know each other, identify common interests (e.g., hobbies), and forge connections. During the first semester and until students attain doctoral candidacy, the program coordinator provides individualized advising by meeting regularly with students in Zoom to help them choose electives, develop their area of specialization, and address their professional goals. In addition, all courses use asynchronous and synchronous video and other practices to establish faculty presence.

Throughout the program, program faculty also meet regularly to ensure that there is a common program culture across online courses, alignment of courses in the online curriculum, and a uniform, humanized program faculty presence in addition to their individual, humanized approaches within their online courses. Student feedback and program improvement is discussed and implemented wherever possible. For example, faculty have revised each of their research courses over two years based on student feedback from previous cohorts. We have not only aligned research course content, but also included additional foci based on our findings from an analysis of dissertations from the first five cohorts in the program (Kumar et al., 2022). Likewise, program faculty discuss common online mentoring practices that have previously helped

students as they embark on the dissertation phase in the program (Kumar & Johnson, 2019). Regular check-ins with students, structure and scaffolding for the dissertation process that allows for student agency, group mentoring that facilitates community building, and group online writing sessions contribute to a humanized experience during the dissertation phase in our online doctoral program.

PEER PRESENCE

The cohort model in our online doctoral program enables continuous structured and informal interactions within the same group of peers. Combined with scaffolded peer feedback, Zoom interactions, and collaborative projects across online courses, this leads to the creation of a community of inquiry in the program. Students connect in person during activities in the orientation on campus. Additionally, we hold monthly Zoom meetings during the first year to create a sense of program belonging among students, address challenges they might face, and facilitate connections outside of coursework and collaborative projects. We also create inquiry groups—smaller groups of students with common interests or professional contexts, that are structured by faculty in the first two semesters but are student-created and student-driven for the rest of the program, to facilitate smaller learner communities.

At the beginning of the program, we recommend that students decide on a common virtual space (e.g., Slack, Teams, Facebook) that is student-driven and excludes faculty. We have found that this helps students connect both academically, as well as socio-emotionally. Program-wide Zoom meetings focused on topics suggested by students continue to be held before candidacy and during the initial phase of the dissertation. Program alumni are often invited to provide advice in program-wide Zoom meetings. Online group mentoring that scaffolds peer feedback and sharing, as well as student-driven online writing sessions contribute to peer online presence during the dissertation phase.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMANIZING COHORT-BASED, ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

BE INTENTIONAL

Many of the strategies described above seem simple but they are powerful and would likely not happen without intentional planning and explicit attention to humanizing across the program. For us, identifying strategies to humanize across the three stages of doctoral work allowed us to be more intentional and impact all aspects of the program. Others may find this strategy useful too.

ENGAGE STUDENTS

We regularly collect feedback from students during the program about program components (e.g., the orientation, community-building activities in the first year, courses or curriculum) as well as after program completion and adjust our program according to their feedback. A prime example of this is how our research coursework has evolved from our initial cohorts. This component of our program was initially lacking student agency and faculty presence. We worked closely with faculty and used student input and humanizing strategies to build better connections within and across research courses and increase relevancy (Kumar et al., 2023). Gaining insights from students takes time, a level of humility, and commitment beyond simply teaching courses, but the benefits are many. Simultaneously, making the rationale for program decisions transparent to students from the beginning empowers them to participate in program improvement.

GAIN FACULTY BUY-IN

Humanizing across a program requires a commitment from program area faculty. Faculty must be willing to humanize within their own courses and to participate in program activities outside of coursework such as orientation meetings and Zoom sessions that focus on topics relevant to doctoral studies (e.g., building reading practices, writing strategies, well-being) and keep students connected at a program level. Faculty in our program have seen the value of doing this because students are more engaged and motivated when

they are connected to each other and to faculty. Faculty also see benefits because students are likely to recommend the program to others when they feel connected to the program and many students have applied because their colleagues who graduated from our program recommended it. Making benefits such as these explicit to faculty can help when soliciting buy-in.

CONCLUSION

None of our eight cohorts have looked exactly the same. They have taken on different personalities and had different needs. While our core content is robust, how we support students in engaging with this content and how we humanize across the program varies slightly from cohort to cohort. Openness, humility, flexibility and a genuine concern for students are essential prerequisites for humanizing across a cohort-based, online professional doctoral program.

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