

# Humanizing Online Learning through Assets-Based Approaches

## Responsive Practices to Support All Learners

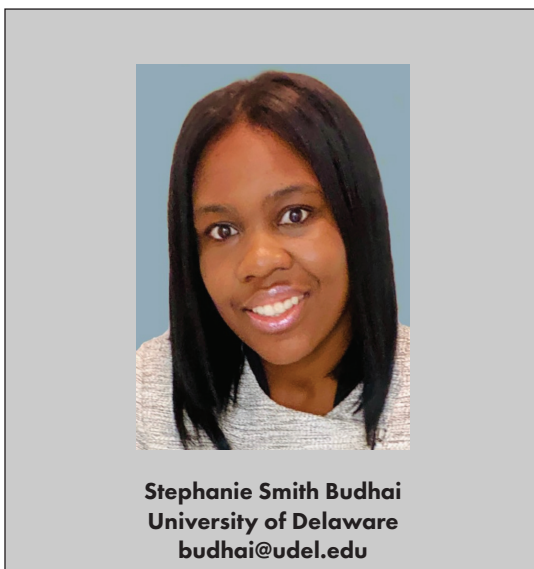
**Stephanie Smith Budhai**

*Keywords:* Online learning, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Humanizing Online Learning

---

Online learning has provided pathways for access to flexible educational experiences, but can also feel isolating and impersonal, lacking authentic relationships with instructors and peers. While we want students to benefit from online learning opportunities, we must ensure that our pedagogies align with providing students with intentional caring environments that connect their lived experiences using humanized asset-based approaches that draw on their strengths. Centering the discussion of humanizing distance education through the lens of three core

pedagogical components of teaching and learning (i.e., instruction, engagement, and assessment) exemplifies how: 1) online instruction can be taught through culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995), 2) student engagement can be fostered through increased social presence (Garrison, 2009), and 3) online assessment practices can lean into students' assets (Yosso, 2005). To that end, below are three overarching responsive practices that can be used to support the design and implementation of human-centered experiences in online learning.



### **ONLINE INSTRUCTION THROUGH CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGIES**

As we think about humanizing any of our pedagogical practices, keeping the “human”, the person/people we are focusing on, and in this case online learners, is key. Indeed, how instructors go about designing and delivering online instruction sets the tone for the course, providing students with insight into the approach and feel of the course, as well as first impressions regarding how the instructor prioritizes and includes them in their learning. While three decades old, the culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) framework by Ladson-Billings (1995) provides a needed blueprint for designing and delivering humanized online instruction. CRP centers instruction that focuses on robust academic success and intellectual growth for all students. Moreover,

CRP incorporates students' diverse cultures so that they appreciate their own assets while gaining fluency in understanding their peers' cultures and assets, in addition to developing critical consciousness. In an online course, this means meeting synchronously with students during the first week of the course and then regularly throughout the duration of the course, getting to know them while also creating space to listen and learn of their own goals for the course and beyond. Asking critical questions (e.g., In what ways might my course perpetuate and/or heighten inequities? How, if at all, does the course content connect with students' lived experiences? From which vantage points am I approaching the learning activities?) and encouraging students to do the same while also looking systematically at outward systems, is part of this too.

Humans are communicative, whether it is verbal, non-verbal, or through written means, thus, communication is at the crux of instruction that is humanized. Lawrence (2020) described teaching as dialogue, where communication is personal, instructive, communal, and authentic, supporting culturally responsive online pedagogy. Crafting discussions with students this way provides a pathway for building positive relationships that are collaborative and focus on them as an individual, as well as the contributions that they make to the class collectively. In reality, most instructors will have a large majority of the course syllabus crafted before the class starts, however, it is important to include assignments and activities that can be co-constructed with students. A study by Lehtinen and colleagues (2023) indicated that knowledge co-construction in synchronous video-based collaboration was mostly sharing information; however, instructors can provide students with deeper opportunities to build agency in their own learning, while connecting to their cultural attributes and experiences. Allow students to suggest readings and authors that provide diverse perspectives, while you ensure that the content you present is equally inclusive. This is especially true in online courses where video is often used as a multimedia teaching aid. It is important that students see people who reflect their cultural heritage along with a wide range of scholars who may have shared experiences and attributes as their peers.

## **ONLINE ENGAGEMENT BY INCREASING SOCIAL PRESENCE**

In distance education, engaging students with course content, their peers, and instructor is critical to humanizing online learning experiences. Garrison et al. (2000) developed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework which focuses on cognitive, teaching, and social presence in computer-mediated environments. The CoI is a seminal framework in distance education and all three elements can be applied to online teaching and learning. Social presence, however, connects particularly well with human-centered online engagement. Social presence is "the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison, 2009, p. 352). As such, it places each person as an individual at the forefront of how online student engagement is imagined and fulfilled.

There are small action-oriented strategies that have large impacts in which instructors can use to increase social presence in online courses. This includes heightening students' social identity, offering students participation in purposeful communication, and providing experiential learning activities that support building authentic relationships (Garrison, 2009). Starting with the institutions' learning management system (LMS), instructors can set up user account profiles that include a picture or representation of everyone in the class, including the instructors. It is much more humanized to look at a person when responding to discussion board postings and using preferred names throughout the course. There is no doubt that education is serious business, but it is ok to use humor in announcements and even include fun images such as Bitmojis (<https://www.bitmoji.com/>), memes, or appropriate mentions of popular culture items. It helps when students know instructors are people too and not an AI bot! Planning for purposeful communication will certainly increase social presence and support building relationships. This includes posting structured announcements throughout the week, sharing resources (especially ones that are co-constructed and suggested by students), having engaged discussions through multifaceted tools such as VoiceThread (<https://voicethread.com/>), Zoom, and even the phone (or FaceTime/Google Meet/WhatsApp). Incorporating experien-

tial and active learning activities in the discussion board that go beyond text responses to readings and building in peer-to-peer opportunities such as accountability teams, peer reviews, and team jigsaw projects, will also provide increased social presence too (Budhai & Skipwith, 2021). Students will feel part of the online course community with regular communication and paths to peers and instructor engagement.

### **ONLINE ASSESSMENT THAT LEVERAGES STUDENTS' ASSETS**

Online teaching and learning should never become a transactional experience where content is placed in an LMS, students read and learn the content, and then are tested. Moreover, to humanize online learning through asset-based and responsive practices, instruction, engagement, and assessment must all be part of the process and include those components. Referencing the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines (CAST, 2018, 2024) which has been recently updated, and specifically, *Multiple Means of Action and Expression* which offers students more than one way to demonstrate their learning, can be helpful in crafting asset-based assessments that consider diverse learning needs. Instead of having all assignments require the same formats and responses, instructors can offer a variety of assignment choices ranging from projects, case studies, and exams, among many other possibilities, giving students different mechanisms to demonstrate their learning. The point here is to have alternatives and choices instead of a one-size-fits-all assessment model that does not always fit each individual student.

Although many online instructors may not typically think of humanizing courses and assessment as symbiotic, incorporating choice in assessment must also leverage students' assets. This is where the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model (Yosso, 2005) can be useful in developing pedagogical strategies that provide options for students while leaning into their strengths. Supporting the elimination of deficit approaches to assessment, while also encouraging students to authentically bring themselves into the evaluative stages of learning to demonstrate what they have learned is quite humanizing. The CCW model looks at what each student knows, recognizing how their cultural capital and assets contribute to their learning.

There are 6 forms of cultural capital described in the CCW model including: 1) aspirational capital, 2) familial capital, 3) social capital, 4) navigational capital, 5) resistant capital, and 6) linguistic capital. In looking at leveraging students' assets for online assessments, social, aspirational, and familial capital can be particularly useful for students to meet learning objectives. Leveraging students' social capital can include students interviewing their family members, friends, and/or those in their professional networks in a way that connects to learning content, collaborating on community projects, and conducting action research where the findings would be meaningful to their communities. Students' aspirational capital can support the preservation of students' personal hopes for the future by designing assessments that specifically target helping students to reach these goals. Additionally, maximizing students' familial capital can bring online learners together in online spaces as they have different shared experience than students in brick-and-mortar classrooms, drawing on these attributes when designing team projects. Where possible, for assignments and assessments, provide students with value-added feedback, and consider recording feedback so students hear their instructor's voice, offering track changes and comments that use their name and a natural tone of challenge and support. Also consider holding virtual meetings to review assessment progress instead of only posting feedback within the LMS.

*Distance Education* can in fact provide *close* experiences for online learners. By approaching online learning through a humanized disposition and mindset, responsive practices can be seamlessly added to the overall learning environment. Weaving in these asset-based approaches to instruction (CRP), engagement (CoI), and assessment (CCW & UDL), at every level of the pedagogical process, students will feel seen, valued, and included. Thus, allowing them to be the best versions of themselves, especially within the online learning environment.

### **REFERENCES**

- Budhai, S. S., & Skipwith, K. (2021). *Best practices in engaging online learners through active and experiential learning in online courses* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- CAST. (2018). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2 Author. <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

- CAST (2024). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0. Retrieved from <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>
- Garrison, D. R. (2009). Communities of inquiry in online learning. *Encyclopedia of distance learning* (2nd ed.). IGI Global.
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education model. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2–3), 87–105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6)
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1163320>
- Lawrence, A. (2020). Teaching as dialogue. An emerging model of culturally responsive online pedagogy. *Journal of Online Learning Research*, 6(1), 5–33.
- Lehtinen, A., Kostainen, E., & Naykki, P. (2023). Co-construction of knowledge and socioemotional interaction in pre-service teachers' video-based online collaborative learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 133, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104299>
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>