



Asian Journal of Distance Education

Humanizing Online Teaching: Bringing the Distant Near

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Abstract: In online distance learning, the lack of interaction between teacher and student can raise a significant drawback that hinders social connection and belonging. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of humanized online teaching in enhancing social presence and teacher-student relationships. In this regard, this study used a narrative review method to present a broad perspective on humanized online teaching in open and distance learning. Humanized online teaching sheds light on a teaching context where student agency, teacher presence, and peer presence are emphasized, creating a safe zone where a sense of belonging is established for both teachers and students. Recognizing the necessity for interaction in effective learning, this paper emphasizes strategies such as empathy, consistent feedback, the use of humor, and leveraging technology like AI to create personalized learning experiences and social media to foster a sense of belonging among students. These techniques are crucial for building trust and community, ultimately leading to higher student engagement. In conclusion, humanizing online teaching requires a comprehensive approach that integrates technology, pedagogy, and human interaction to establish a supportive and engaging online learning environment. By discussing the potential and drawbacks, the study emphasizes the need for consistent humanizing practices to create inclusive and supportive online classrooms.

Keywords: humanized online teaching, online distance learning, online education, interaction, social presence, teaching presence, learner well-being, communication, empathy, sense of community

Highlights

What is already known about this topic:

- Lack of interaction hinders the effective learning process in online classes.
- Establishing social presence is crucial for an inclusive and supportive online environment.

What this paper contributes:

- This paper explores humanized online teaching techniques.
- This paper highlights the importance of humanized online teaching on improving social presence in online classes.

Implications for theory, practice and/or policy:

- Further research is needed on the relationship between students' outcomes and humanized online teaching techniques.
- Teachers need to employ these techniques during their lessons to improve the quality of interaction.



Introduction: Humanized online teaching as the fire of Prometheus

"We find each other where we are in the human experience and go from there"
- (Rodriguez, 2008, p.345)

There have been changes in approaches to online teaching over time. The shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered environment has altered the way we see the learning process. Interaction has gained popularity because of its undeniable impact on effective learning. This issue is complex in an online environment because distance separates the students from teachers, other students, and the learning environment. There are a great number of studies discussing the dos and don'ts to improve the quality of the interaction in online distance learning (Miao et al., 2022; Moore, 1989). These studies have contributed to the literature on perceiving the term "distance" and teacher-student interaction. At this point, we are all familiar with the widely known framework "Community of Inquiry" (CoI) and its components such as teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 1999). Various studies discussing what a humanized environment looks like have something in common: Social presence (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020; Weiss, 2000). Among the three elements of CoI, social presence mentioned by Garrison et al. (1999) stands as a significant key in humanized online classes. With the help of social presence, the students and teacher cultivate affective relationships in the community.

Despite the studies highlighting the importance of social presence in online classes, we can clearly see that the interaction between the student and teacher is often limited, and it makes students feel isolated. This isolation leads to an environment where the students don't feel connected with others. According to Sun's (2014) findings, one of the difficulties confronted by the students in online classes is that they have difficulty in engaging and socializing. They feel lonely because they learn in small groups and there is a lack of interaction between peers. These difficulties are also related to isolation and lack of self-motivation. Based on these findings, it is evident that social presence isn't established well, and the students' needs aren't valued enough. As human beings, we all have social needs outside the classroom such as the need to be valued and to communicate. So, why do we tend to ignore these social needs in a learning environment? Students' thoughts, needs, and concerns are with them, and they can be an obstacle or contribute to their learning process. That's why ignoring them would be a big mistake. Interaction is a key driver for effective learning. In this case, the question arises: How can we improve the quality of the interaction at a distance?

Humanized online teaching plays a vital role in replacing this distance with presence by creating a sense of community (Mehta, & Aguilera, 2020; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). Humanized online teaching incorporates strategies and practices that focus on human connection and interaction by creating an inclusive learning environment (Murtafi'a & Pradita, 2024). Furthermore, it ensures the students that they are in a welcoming and supportive environment where dialogue is present. While there are a number of researchers focusing on the importance of humanized online teaching, the literature lacks implementations and guidance for a humanized online environment (Czerkowski & Schmidt, 2017; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020; Weiss, 2000). The teachers need guidance on this issue, and it is crucial for them to optimize practices. In their study, Li et al. (2022) emphasize the need for research focusing on the relationship between students' outcomes and practices for humanized classes. There is also a call for more papers exploring techniques to humanize online teaching. (Czerkowski & Schmidt, 2017) Consequently, a thorough understanding of practices is crucial. Noticing the relationship between student outcomes and humanizing practices makes us comprehend the importance of humanized online teaching and ignites the journey toward a supportive and engaging online learning environment. Taking this into consideration, this narrative review study aims to present a broad perspective on humanized online teaching and fill the gap in the literature by discussing the techniques and guiding the teachers who want to benefit from humanizing practices.

Literature

“If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed.”

- Paulo Freire

The idea of humanized online classes takes its roots in humanizing pedagogies that value students' needs and well-being. Paulo Freire, who has a focus on humanism, describes humanizing pedagogy as the process of “becoming” for teachers and students. (Salazar, 2013, p.128). To value and ensure the students' well-being, merely transmitting the information is not enough. Humanized online teaching can be described as incorporating strategies and practices centering teacher-student interaction, thus enabling them to feel connected by creating an inclusive learning environment (Li et al., 2022; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020; Weiss, 2000). The lack of interaction in online teaching makes the students feel the distance that separates them from teachers, other students, and the learning environment. Cultivating a sense of community based on social connection is the fundamental element in humanized classrooms where the students are more engaged. The literature on humanized online teaching revolves around the Col framework consisting of three components: teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence. According to Murtafi'ah and Pradita (2024), social presence differs from other presences because it requires the teachers' personal willingness not to distance themselves from their students. It can be described as the students' need to display their characteristics in an environment where they see themselves as “real people” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89). Once they acquire social identity, they can be socially connected and perform better.

Among the studies focusing on a more humanized environment, Weis (2000) provides solutions to the problems encountered in online teaching. We can group these solutions as follows: adding tone, using expressive language such as metaphor and humour, creating biographies to get to know each other, creating a virtual break room outside the class hour, modeling appropriate interaction, and creating an ethical community of learners. Adding tone is also discussed in Czerkawski and Schmidt's (2017) study. The researchers emphasize using a friendly tone to give students meaningful experiences. These solutions contribute to the literature on establishing an engaging environment and guiding other researchers. Among the studies on humanized online teaching, Li et al. (2022) mention the most discussed elements in the literature which are student agency, instructor presence, and peer presence. Moreover, Salazar (2013) highlights the role of student agency (autonomy) in creating a humanized experience and calls for more papers focusing on this element. The role of the students in humanizing online teaching is crucial as well as teachers. Students engaging in self-determined activities feel a sense of purpose and it leads to humanized learning experiences that give them responsibility (Li et al., 2022).

Humanizing techniques in learning environments also focus on establishing a safe space to cultivate relationships by building trust among members of the community. In his study, Stewart (2023) discusses the techniques that have positive responses for humanizing the environment. These are weekly introductory videos, providing feedback, multimodal assignments, and the use of social media. The author also notes that establishing a safe space is not possible without humanizing practices. There are four key components provided by Pacansky et al. (2020) to cultivate safe zones. They are trust, awareness, presence, and empathy. In their study, numerous techniques are recommended to humanize classes, and they are all similar to the other ones above-mentioned.

On the other hand, there are some concerns about social presence in the literature. Even if teachers provide online discussion opportunities or virtual break rooms to establish a social presence by allowing students to connect, there might be some students avoiding these opportunities and hesitating to ask for help when needed. In other words, they might show some resilience (Baum & McPherson, 2019). The students' reluctance to engage in interactions is also mentioned in Murtafi'ah and Pradita's (2024) study as a challenge. Some students struggle with showing such presence and self-directed learning which can prevent them from living an effective learning experience (Kop, 2011). Furthermore, the

researchers mention that the number of students attending the classes is also important because too many students might need additional support.

To sum up, the idea of humanized online classes stems from the principles of humanizing pedagogy, which prioritizes the students' well-being and needs. Prior research on humanized online teaching shed light on the importance of social presence by providing techniques to enhance the experiences. Researchers underscore the necessity of fostering teacher-student interactions to create an inclusive and engaging learning environment. The Col framework, encompassing social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence, is central to this idea and builds a foundation for humanizing techniques. Social presence is particularly crucial for fostering a sense of belonging in online classes. Student agency, teacher presence, and peer presence are discussed to establish a safe zone in online classes. Strategies based on the idea of enhancing social presence such as adding tone and sense of humour, providing introductory videos and timely feedback, and creating virtual break rooms for students have a vital impact on the educational experience.

Methodology

Research Design

This study aims to deepen our understanding on humanized online teaching and emphasize its role in enhancing social presence in online and distance learning environments. A narrative review method is the most suitable approach for such objectives. It offers interpretation and critique, with its primary value being the enhancement of understanding of a certain concept (Baethge et al., 2019; Greenhalgh et al., 2018). Narrative reviews provide general discussions, evaluations on past studies, identification of gaps in current literature on the topic, and justifications for future research (Ferrari, 2015). This research employs a narrative review methodology to synthesize existing literature on the topic of interest. The narrative review approach is particularly suited for exploring humanized online teaching phenomena where diverse perspectives and experiences are essential for understanding the subject matter. Because of the above-mentioned reasons, the narrative review method is considered appropriate for this paper.

Research Procedures

The data for this narrative review were collected from a variety of peer-reviewed articles that focus on humanized teaching particularly in the context of online and distance learning. The studies that specifically address the humanized online teaching in online distance learning environments were prioritized. The selected literature was analyzed, and the findings were categorized into key themes that emerge from the data. The synthesis aimed to highlight both the benefits and challenges associated with humanized online teaching, drawing connections between different studies to create a cohesive narrative.

Limitations

Despite the strengths of the narrative review methodology, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the subjective nature of narrative reviews can lead to potential biases in the selection and interpretation of literature. The researchers' perspective may influence which studies were included and how their findings are synthesized (Fuchs, 2023; Luzano, 2024). To mitigate this risk, a transparent approach to literature selection was employed, and multiple reviewers were involved in the analyzing process to enhance reliability.

Findings: How to Humanize Online Teaching?

“More than machinery, we need humanity.”

-Charlie Chaplin

To humanize online teaching, educators can employ various strategies that prioritize student-centered approaches, foster engagement, and create a sense of community in the virtual learning environment. One effective method is through the implementation of formative assessment practices (Sun & Liu, 2021). By utilizing formative assessment techniques, teachers can continuously monitor students' progress, gather feedback, and adjust their teaching methods accordingly to enhance the quality of online instruction. This approach allows for personalized feedback and support, which can make students feel more connected and valued in the online learning process.

Moreover, incorporating machine learning algorithms to predict students' adaptability in online classrooms can significantly improve teaching effectiveness (Li, 2024). By leveraging predictive analytics, educators can tailor their instructional strategies to better meet the diverse learning needs of students, thereby creating a more personalized and engaging learning experience. Understanding students' adaptability levels can help teachers design targeted interventions to support struggling learners and challenge advanced students appropriately. Effective online instruction, as highlighted in the research, relies on several key factors (Sun & Chen, 2016). These include well-designed course content, motivated interaction between teachers and learners, adequately prepared and supported educators, the establishment of a sense of online learning community, and the integration of advancing technologies. By focusing on these elements, teachers can create a more engaging and supportive online learning environment that promotes active participation and collaboration among students.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of online teaching is closely linked to the instructional strategies employed by educators (Cheng et al., 2021). Research suggests that teaching effectiveness in an online format hinge on how teachers guide and facilitate students to achieve academic goals using various instructional measures, active engagement techniques, and establishing a strong presence in the virtual classroom. By actively engaging students and providing meaningful learning experiences, teachers can create a more humanized online learning environment that promotes student success and satisfaction.

In the realm of online distance education, the use of effective instructional methods, adequate support systems, and well-designed course structures are essential for facilitating student performance and satisfaction (Kauffman, 2015). By incorporating these elements into online teaching practices, educators can create a supportive and engaging learning environment that promotes student success and fosters a sense of belonging within the virtual classroom. Engaging students in online discussions through asynchronous learning platforms can also contribute to humanizing online teaching (Zezarwati et al., 2022). By leveraging online discussion techniques, educators can promote focused interactions on course topics, minimize distractions, and encourage active participation among students. This approach allows for meaningful exchanges of ideas and perspectives, fostering a collaborative learning environment that mirrors traditional face-to-face discussions.

In conclusion, humanizing online teaching requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes student-centered practices, fosters engagement, and cultivates a sense of community in the virtual classroom. By incorporating formative assessment techniques, leveraging predictive analytics, and focusing on key elements of effective online instruction, educators can create a supportive and engaging learning environment that promotes student success and satisfaction. Additionally, addressing the challenges of online teaching, utilizing facilitation strategies, and integrating technology tools can further enhance the humanization of online instruction, ultimately leading to a more enriching and impactful learning experience for students.

Discussions

"I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."

- Michelangelo

This study aims to examine humanized online teaching and the techniques that can be used to humanize online teaching by stressing the importance of social presence. Since students need interaction to learn effectively, teachers need to explore and use the necessary strategies and techniques in online environments. These techniques may seem familiar and simple to us, but they are often "taken for granted" according to Aragon (2003). It can be observed that teachers who lack experience in online instruction need a detailed and comprehensive guide to humanize practices in their courses (Li et al., 2022). To maintain an inclusive environment by building trust and fostering belonging, consistency in humanizing practices is a must.

Through humanized online teaching, teachers help students reach their own potential. The more they have a presence, the more they scaffold their students. They are the sculptors carving the marble, lighting a spark. Thus, teachers may be able to better understand their students and create instructional designs that reflect their requirements and create encouraging online learning environments by using humanized teaching techniques (Karakaya, 2021). As mentioned before, the students need to be heard and valued. We need empathy to hear them. All in all, they shouldn't think they are "just another brick in the wall" as Pink Floyd (1979) famously sang. In their paper, Pacansky-Brock et al. (2020) highlight the importance of teacher's empathy toward students. In other words, empathy is the key to establishing a safe zone for each member of the community. While students' needs have been a subject of debate for a long time, the importance and benefits of empathy in the classroom are rarely discussed in the literature on humanized online teaching. Why do the teachers and students need to care? We may have different experiences, but it doesn't mean our feelings and concerns are unfathomable. We can understand each other and it makes us feel connected. So, it is time to start seeing things through our students' eyes without being judgmental if we want to establish positive teacher-student relationships (Pacansky-Brock, 2020). According to research, it can be said that programs integrating empathy into the curriculum have students with high test scores (Townsend, 2012). In this regard, empathy is needed, and its outcomes should be tested in online classes as well since it is a part of humanizing the online environment. We can cultivate a positive culture, which increases a sense of community, and leads the students to be leaders in the communities with the help of empathy (Owen, 2015). Based on Stewart's (2023) findings, it can be precisely said that these humanizing techniques made it possible for students to feel a strong connection to their teacher and peers.

Unlike other studies, Jones et al. (2008) emphasize teaching presence, which is about designing the educational experience (Garrison et al., 1999), instead of just focusing on social presence. They mention the role of teachers and the importance of their instructions before the establishment of a learning community and during the learning process. In this sense, they recommend introductory videos. The main purpose of these videos is to give related information about the course. At the beginning of each week, teachers can post a video about upcoming assignments, related information, provide feedback, and talk about what is going on in their daily lives. According to Pacansky-Brock et al. (2020), these videos should be as natural as possible. You don't need a perfect setup. Just record yourself at home, share your daily life as a real person, and make your students familiar with the course. It is essential for establishing a social and teaching presence. Introductory videos are also mentioned in Stewart's (2023) study. In the study, weekly videos full of informal feedback are so appreciated by students that a participant said:

"Thanks so much for your encouraging video feedback this week. I could see your excitement and genuineness shine through. The feedback really reinforced 'Hey, you're getting this' when sometimes you're sitting at your desk alone, you wonder if you really are getting it!" (p.13)

That is the point of humanizing efforts. We should ensure our students that they are not sitting at their desks alone. We should be there for them not to isolate themselves. For this reason, timely feedback is an incentive to connect. These videos serve as a vital factor in establishing the community, therefore humanizing the course by connecting the teachers to students. But we should also explore the opportunities of teachers' roles outside class hours. Creating a virtual break room outside class hours would be a great way to maintain a sense of community as Weiss (2020) mentions in his study. Just focusing on the efforts before and during the course won't be enough if we want to humanize our class as much as possible. It should be a natural process that transcends class hours. Speaking of transcending class hours, the use of social media is a crucial technique to establish a social presence which can be mentioned in Stewart's (2023) study, and it also allows for increasing the quality of interaction between peers outside class hours. Using social media allows a more personal level, thus enabling them to keep in touch with their peers and teachers outside. Sharing lives and making small talk via social media lead to more connections.

One of the humanizing techniques provided by many researchers is using humour in classes (Aragon, 2003; Murtafi'ah & Pradita, 2024; Weiss, 2000). We can establish a social presence among teachers and students with the help of humour. It has been found that humour increases interest and productivity; decreases boredom, anxiety, and social distance, thus enhancing learning experiences (Altukruni, 2022). Of course, our use of humour should be in a way that does not offend the other students. In the context of the digital revolution, memes have gained great popularity in popular culture and changed the way we communicate, shaping our digital experience. We can describe memes as funny visual images or videos that can be shared and rapidly spread via social media (Irving-Bell, 2020). Memes have become an integral part of internet culture, and they can also be used in educational environments. In their study, Dongqiang et al. (2020) mention the possible ways of using memes in education and emphasize their importance of being a bridge between the teachers and students by transmitting the educational content in a humorous way. They can be used to simplify the content for better memorization. The researchers see the memes as a visual representation of the students' learning experience, in a sense, their reactions. They can be relatable, thus humanizing the environment. The memes can also be used as icebreakers for new topics to make students engage in class or revision to enhance the learning process (Irving-Bell, 2020). While creating the modules, we, as teachers, can add humorous memes just like introductory videos or encourage our students to share memes in virtual communications boards/discussions to make them connect with each other. Using memes surely increases the social presence and makes our classes fun. It is evident that sharing memes allows us to foster connections, build communities, and create a sense of belonging (Molina & Erlichman, n.d.; Pictory.ai, 2023). Based on these findings, it can be clearly said that memes can facilitate establishing humanized classes in humorous contexts.

Adding tone is also discussed and seen as an important issue among the studies in humanized online teaching literature (Aragon, 2003; Weiss, 2000). We can do that by using our body language or facial expressions while speaking, but written language can be more challenging. As it does not provide auditory cues, teachers should add tone through the use of written cues and encourage their students (Weiss, 2000). The use of emoticons is a way of adding tone, allowing students to interpret the messages. Emoticons are facial expressions created by using punctuation marks on the keyboard (Aragon, 2003). Through the use of emoticons, we can express what we mean more clearly in messages. It creates a more natural environment and removes the barriers. Now the technology allows us to add emojis without using punctuation marks if we want to express our feelings. According to the Unicode Consortium, nearly 92% of netizens, people who use the Internet, use emojis and most of them also use these emojis at work. They say they feel more connected to their team (Pumble, n.d.). Since nearly everyone is familiar with emojis and enjoys using them while texting, it is time to use them frequently in the educational environment, too.

As mentioned before, technological advancements have altered the way we see the education process and enhanced the teachers' and students' online learning experiences by offering new opportunities for

them. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a revolutionary tool, and it is obvious that it has great potential in learning and teaching. In particular, with the release of ChatGPT, a chatbot based on generative AI and large language models (LLMs), there is a partial opportunity to humanize teaching through AI. AI has an impact on education by providing instant feedback, and 24/7 support to students through chatbots, enhancing accessibility, and personalizing learning experiences (Vavekanand, 2024). Based on the research, students perceive AI as a useful tool in their learning process and they are opposed to using it (Kumar Ravi & Raman, 2022). For these reasons, leveraging AI in education is a need, but we should also think about the drawbacks within the scope of humanized online teaching. According to Crawford et al. (2024), although the usage of AI chatbots has a positive impact on being socially supported, it has complex effects on loneliness and a sense of belonging. In other words, the use of AI chatbots may increase loneliness and decrease the sense of belonging among students. After all, they need to interact with a human for academic support. The researchers also mention the need for further research on this relationship for more precise information, because it is an indirect effect. Based on this research, we can say that when students are more socially connected to their peers, rather than AI, it can give more positive outcomes such as academic success and a sense of well-being. These findings don't indicate that we should discourage our students from using AI, in contrast, we should encourage them because it offers great opportunities at the same time. For example, chatbots can be great for students who are not comfortable with asking for help at first. AI helps them have an independent learning journey. The point of humanized online teaching is to provide a comfortable learning environment for all students with different needs and expectations. Balancing AI integration and human interaction is important, and it should be taken into consideration to maximize the benefits of AI. Real-life relationships are still a treasure in AI-dominated academic settings. We shouldn't let it replace but rather balance.

To sum up, humanizing online teaching is essential for fostering effective learning environments where students feel valued and connected. Emphasizing social and teaching presence through empathy, adding a tone, and sharing humor through the use of memes create more engaged students. Implementing these techniques will enhance their learning experiences. Teachers' role outside the class hours is also crucial. They will lead to more natural and humanized environments. As studies highlight, these strategies not only increase learning outcomes such as academic success but also help students and teachers feel connected by establishing a social presence. By using these humanizing techniques consistently, teachers can create inclusive and supportive online classrooms, thus encouraging students to reach their full potential. Studies are focusing on the techniques and student satisfaction, but more studies are needed to examine the relationship between humanizing techniques and students' outcomes.

Conclusion and Suggestions: I, Human

Isaac Asimov's three laws of robotics which were mentioned in his book "I, Robot" (Asimov, 1950) can be adapted for humanized online teaching as follows:

- A teacher must prioritize the well-being of others and create an inclusive environment that prevents any harm to their emotional or psychological health (Murtafi'ah & Pradita, 2024).
- A teacher must foster a sense of community and interaction among others, except where such actions would conflict with the First Law (Li et al., 2022).
- A teacher must act with empathy and trust, as long as such actions do not conflict with the First or Second Law (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020).

In conclusion, each learner brings different needs and expectations to the classes. Humanized online teaching allows meeting these expectations, which is crucial both for students and teachers, by establishing an inclusive and supportive environment. Since students in online classes are more prone to isolation, interaction has vital importance. Lack of interaction hinders the effective learning process in

online classes and this problem shouldn't be the elephant in the room. The importance of interaction in education experiences can't be ignored. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to increase the quality of interaction in online classes if we want to achieve academic success and affective relationships at the same time. Based on this need, humanized online teaching ignites the journey towards a more engaged environment where the students feel themselves and their teacher as a real person during the educational experience. Humanizing techniques focus on increasing social presence and also highlight the importance of student agency, teacher presence, and peer presence. These techniques require time and effort, but we shouldn't forget that all of these efforts will be rewarded by better relationships that are worth trying. Once we explore these humanized techniques, we, as teachers, can be Prometheus holding the flame. Now, our next step will be to pass this flame to our learners by humanizing our classes as much as possible in online environments.

As online and distance learning has evolved significantly, the need for humanized online teaching became increasingly apparent. Future research directions in this domain should focus on several key areas that enhance the effectiveness of online learning environments, emphasizing social presence, personalization, and pedagogical strategies. In conclusion, the future of humanized online teaching in online and distance learning environments is ripe for exploration across various dimensions. By focusing on social presence, self-regulation, personalization, pedagogical strategies, and artificial intelligence technologies, researchers can contribute to the development of more effective and engaging online learning experiences. These efforts will ultimately enhance the quality of online distance education and support the diverse needs of learners in an increasingly digital world.

This study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of humanized online teaching in online distance learning environments. By synthesizing existing literature, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective online education practices and offers insights for educators seeking to enhance their teaching approaches in the digital landscape.

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Dilara Boz: Conceptualization, writing—original draft preparation; Hasan Uçar: writing—review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Accessibility Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Ethics and Consent

As this review synthesizes existing literature, ethical considerations primarily pertain to the proper citation and acknowledgment of the original authors' contributions. No primary data collection involving human subjects was conducted, thus minimizing ethical concerns related to participant confidentiality and consent.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Isaac Asimov for introducing “Three Laws of Robot” in his unforgettable book “I, Robot”. We adapted the rules in our paper.

We are also grateful to Pink Floyd for their legendary song “Another Brick in the Wall” which we mentioned in the paper.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Article History

Received: December 4, 2024 – Accepted: January 1 2025.

Suggested citation:

Boz, D. & Uçar, H. (2025). Humanizing online teaching: Bringing the distant near. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 20(1), 36-48. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14554012>



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