



Book review

Humanizing Distance Learning: Centering Equity and Humanity in Times of Crisis

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France, P. E. (2021). *Humanizing distance learning: Centering equity and humanity in times of crisis*. Corwin Press. (pp. 185).

Paul E. France, a National Board-certified teacher, literacy specialist, and education consultant, brought his lived experience and expertise from working in an EdTech company and teaching during the pandemic to his book, *Humanizing Distance Learning: Centering Equity and Humanity in Times of Crisis*. In his work, France's text situates the idea of human-centred pedagogy (Karakaya, 2021) as a conceptual framework that centres student independence and liberation and dismantles white supremacy. Although France highlights many examples of best teaching practice in the K–12 context, his text is a call to action for educators to prioritise humanity and student liberation over technology and quantitative assessments.

This book features 10 short and accessible chapters and an introductory section, “Why Humanity?” in which the author sets his expectations for the book, calling for critical reflection and creating a sense of urgency for building student liberation in online learning. The introduction provides his rationale and serves as a call to action for educators to think critically, reflect on their practice, and reform the dehumanising practices in education that stem from white supremacy. This section also advocates for the humanisation of teaching and learning, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and other ongoing global crises. It encourages a shift towards more human-centred pedagogy. He ends each chapter with tips for teachers to encourage systemic change in classrooms; for example, by teaching students how to learn independently, building trust among students.

In Chapter 1, the author sets the stage for the book by presenting his ultimate goal—fostering student independence as a form of liberation. Throughout this chapter, France discusses independent learning habits and distinguishes them from individualism as one of the characteristics of white supremacy. In Chapter 2, France introduces trauma-informed instruction and how to build a sense of community—he examines small-group and collaborative learning in the context of socio-emotional learning. He suggests a trauma-informed approach, considering three key areas that are often disrupted during times of crisis—a sense of safety, connectedness, and hope. France offers resources and suggests tools to help educators provide a form of social interaction that students need to overcome the social isolation exacerbated by the pandemic, such as creating spaces where they can express their feelings, and setting emotional check-ins.

In Chapter 3, France discusses building a classroom culture that reflects the values of liberation learning. To him, liberation learning is about a supportive classroom culture that values feedback and self-reflection. Accompanying his personal narratives, the author highlights the democratic and organic nature of building classroom norms and agreements with students' contributions, which are meant to be flexible and evolve over time. The author suggests modelling and

normalising rupture and repair, and prioritising trust in relationships to help build a responsive and resilient classroom culture.

Chapter 4 introduces sustainable structuring and reframes the conversation from planning daily lessons to planning arcs. By adopting learning-oriented planning from Wiggins and McTighe's backward design approach (2005), France attempts to use core high-impact pedagogies such as framing learning goals in student-friendly language and providing easily adapted lessons for in-person and distance learning which leverages dialogue and discourse. As an example of planning a lesson, France uses a fairy tale unit influenced by Lucy Calkins's units of study (2013). France concludes this chapter by providing a question-planning structure to keep teachers on track with the backward design approach.

Drawing from his experience as a gay white educator who faced discrimination and erasure of his identity, the author unpacks identity in Chapter 5. This chapter highlights the importance of provoking a discussion and leveraging classroom conversations in which students feel comfortable discussing their identities. In this chapter, the author also suggests introducing identity study in the first unit and provides a lesson plan template encompassing the five questions from Chapter 4. Influenced by Sara Ahmed's book *Being the Change* (2018), France advocates learning this unit through a culturally relevant lens, providing examples and suggesting activities, materials, and metacognitive tools that help to humanise instruction and support sharing identity in a safe environment.

Chapter 6 discusses redefining student success and humanising assessment, which is built on a needs-based and human-centred approach that requires teachers to provide feedback to students and promote self-reflection and ongoing conversation. The author encourages teachers to get students involved in the assessment process by understanding the rationale behind the assessment, discouraging students from engaging in academic dishonesty. He views Muhammad's (2020) four-layer equity framework for historically responsive literacy (HRL) as a valuable approach for promoting equity and inclusivity in education. He prioritises starting with learning goals over the content and offers valuable resources and strategies that guide teachers in gauging students learning from a distance.

Chapter 7 discusses complex instruction in distance learning. This style of pedagogy can guide lesson planning and make it more sustainable, allowing teachers to focus most of their energy on connecting with students and maximising the time for verbal feedback. France explains that combining complex instruction with a workshop model is an effective teaching approach that incorporates multiple dimensions in the instructional process, allowing students to exercise their independence in whole group, small group, and independent work settings. He provides valuable strategies and resources, such as journals and single-point rubrics, to help teachers create a sense of community online. France recommends Aimee Buckner's book *Notebook Know-How* (2005), which provides writing strategies that embrace independence for online writing.

Chapter 8 outlines strategies for teachers to become EdTech minimalists. France advocates maximising positive and active screen time to promote problem-solving, critical thinking, and student independence. He provides helpful self-assessments for teachers to identify active screen time and offers some examples of technology tools that promote active screen time and provide qualitative data, such as iCardsort, Popplet, electronic math manipulatives, Seesaw, and digital portfolios.

Chapter 9 discusses the concept of the digital divide, which has a long history but became more visible during COVID-19. The author reflects on the education system and the inequities in school funding that exacerbate the digital divide. He sheds light on the detriments of using web-based, adaptive tools for distance or in-person learning, highlighting that "they make teachers'

jobs more complex, causing them to sift through meaningless quantitative data, all the while dehumanizing our students in the process”. (p.148)

In the last chapter, France reflects on his ideas. He highlights the need for connection in distance learning. He showcases examples of engaging activities such as a talent show and passion project, and uses Kanban boards, which help students build their executive functioning skills, take ownership of their work, and reduce their reliance on their teachers. The narrative of his journey throughout the school year culminated in this chapter, as he reached the end of the school year and wept at the conclusion of his last day. Through his narrative, the reader will also feel empathy as they learn more about his experience of discrimination.

Throughout the chapters, Paul emphasises student-driven and inquiry-based approaches and supports self-awareness and self-advocacy by leveraging self-reflection, feedback, and allocating more time to spend with students—all of which are essential for humanising learning. These values are influenced by Freire’s critical pedagogy and problem-posing education (2014), which is centered on enhancing dialogues, creativity, reflection, and action. This approach opposes the banking model (Freire, 2014), “that value lecture-based teaching or rote memorization make students consumers of academic content, forcing them to take in information and regurgitate it on a test” (p.10). In this book, the author supports his arguments with his own insights and experience rather than empirical evidence from scholarly research, which makes this title stand out from other works in the field, such as Northcote and Gosselin’s (2016) book. This might be due to the author’s intent to adopt a more narrative and conversational writing approach, to make it more accessible to a broader audience.

Overall, France’s book is an informative and well-written call for teachers. Throughout the text, he critiques the educational system built on white supremacy, focuses on student independence and liberation as a practical analysis framework, and provides strategies based on theory to guide teachers’ practice in person and distance learning. Using his personal narratives and his teaching experience, France offers a space for teachers to reflect on their practice and examine their own biases and roles in systems of oppression to effectively implement a flexible and culturally responsive pedagogy. Applying concepts from humanising distance learning to K–12 teaching and pedagogy praxis means prioritising students’ connection and collaboration, providing feedback, and encouraging self-reflection.

This book is a valuable source for educators who aim to dismantle white supremacy, appreciate humanity in teaching, and try to find ways to connect digitally with their students. The book provides practical applications for humanising in-person and online learning in a narrative manner, from lesson planning to assessment in order to foster student independence.

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