

Humanizing Educators and Students ^[1]

April 15, 2020 by [Alexis Stoddard](#) | [Office of Digital Education](#) ^[2]

Life happens. It's always happened. People get sick. Family members pass. Spouses get divorced. Babies are born. Cars break down. Jobs are lost and gained. Personal and professional lives have always had ups and downs in terms of stressful events. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's happening in similar ways for everyone at the same time. This uniting of a global population's life stresses and uncertainties is being brought to the forefront, and while I would never wish a pandemic upon anyone, I have noticed a humbling trend recently that gives me hope.

Since CU Denver and CU Anschutz transitioned to fully remote teaching, I have spent each working day almost entirely on Zoom talking with faculty about our new reality. For postsecondary educators, working remotely is challenging but certainly not impossible. Connecting remotely hasn't actually been the most challenging part for me, but learning how to continue as "normal" when the separation between home and work has disappeared proves to be a different adventure altogether. Without fail, nearly every faculty member I talked with via Zoom apologized for some unexpected interruption in the background, be it kids, pets, significant others, or simply a messy room. Why do we feel the need to apologize for being human?

Certainly, learning how to balance our expected productivity levels while also sharing a physical space with our families around the clock presents a new challenge for many, myself included. But I see this as an opportunity to open up the communication channels around the idea of the "whole person." Educators and students have always been complex individuals, but that broad complexity is typically narrowed once we cross the threshold into work or school. Perhaps the bright side to being quarantined and asked to work, teach, and learn remotely is that we will all be reminded that each of us is a human being who plays many different roles and juggles many different responsibilities beyond what is presented in a classroom setting.

I love seeing the visible change that appears on countless faculty faces when they apologize for their child entering the camera frame, tugging for attention, and instead of being annoyed, I say, "Please introduce me!" The instant rapport that can come from sharing a laugh about a child's potty song or smiling over an excited puppy simply can't be matched in a typical video conference. I read a piece on social media about a trend where parents are referring to their children as "coworkers" to hilarious effect. In one example, someone wrote, "My coworker yelled 'WATCH ME WIGGLE MY BUTT!' repeatedly during my last conference call." It's nice to see the way real people are coping with an unimaginably difficult situation. I have a long-time friend who is an assistant professor of digital history and is facing the new challenges he never expected. Moving back in with his mom recently, back into his childhood room that hasn't been touched in 20 years, prompted him to reflect if the Hanson posters on his wall

would be an appropriate backdrop to his newly remote course on facism. I vote yes! The more our students can see faculty as real people, the more connected and successful they are likely to be.

It undoubtedly will be interesting to see how educators adapt to these new circumstances, and how they hopefully will bring digital pedagogy into their interactions with students. What I also hope is that it will cause them to reflect on being more conscious about work-life balance, about what it means to have a professional persona, and most importantly, about how we can better humanize our higher education classrooms to reflect the needs of ourselves and our students. As an educator myself, I always tell others that the most important trick I've learned to being a good teacher isn't about lesson plans, creativity, technology, learning theory, or anything you learn in grad school — it's simply about being authentic and showing students you care. The rest can be useful, but if you show students that you genuinely care about them, learning will follow. That is my hope for a lasting educational outcome due to this pandemic. We went in as students and educators. Hopefully, we will come out as humans.

remote learning ^[3], [COVID-19](#) ^[4], [pedagogy](#) ^[5]

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