

“The voice serves as feedback”: students’ affective experiences of an online doctoral programme

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For future generations of learners in the globalised context of higher education, online programmes will become an increasingly viable and popular option, particularly for the time-pressed professional seeking to embark on postgraduate study. However, we still have a lot to learn about what it feels like to learn online and what teachers can do with technology to make the most the potential of online learning. Studies show that online students use highly emotional language to describe their experiences, indicating that learners feel a great deal online (Reilly, Gallegher-Lepak, & Killion, 2012). This paper will draw on Wetherell's (2012) exploration of affective practice to theorise online learners’ responses to technology and suggest ways of harnessing the potential of technology to create supportive and effective learning environments online. Thematic and narrative analysis of interview research conducted with Laureate Online Education-University of Liverpool EdD students will be presented.

There is a growing body of literature focused on the importance of emotional responses to learning online. For example, Gilmore & Warren (2007) observed that the virtual classroom created a greater intensity of emotion and feelings of connection with students whilst teaching online. The absence of bodily cues, they argued, has the potential to impact the emotionality of online communication both positively and negatively. The online environment can encourage anger or ‘flaming’ because intentions are misunderstood, but it can also create more intimacy precisely because online participants are more likely to ‘self-disclose’ personal details. Reilly, Gallegher-Lepak, and Killion, (2012) highlighted the range of both positive and negative emotions experienced by online students, whilst Zembylas, Theodorou, and Pavlakis, (2008) emphasised the importance and range of adult learners’ emotional response to online learning, and the significance of their interpretations of those emotions.

Outside the field of education, the intensity of our engagement with the technologies of consumer culture, with increasing attention to social media, has been theorized in terms of affect (Dean, 2010; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Grossberg, 1992; Massumi, 2002). Highly relevant to the experience of online learning, affect has been explored “in relation to the technologies that are allowing us both to ‘see’ affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body’s organic-physiological constraints” (Clough, 2007: 2). According to Dean (2010), communication technologies capture us in networks which intensify our affective responses.

Online learning typically depends on Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) that facilitate discussion in forums, multimedia, hyperlinks, messaging, co-construction of web pages, chat rooms, email and more – duplicating many of the communication styles that have come to characterize commercial social media. This project will apply Wetherall’s (2012) concept of affective practice to understand better the online learners’ experience of technology. Such an approach, it is argued, can guide the deployment of technology to harness the potential of affects to be interpreted in positive rather than negative ways. The research focused on an exploration of students’ affective responses to technology used to deliver assignment feedback. Dean (2010) described the addictive experience of blogging as being captured within the ‘constant-contact’ feedback loops of social media, which she argued produces a fragile and risky enjoyment, always teetering on anxiety. This may relate to online learning, since Reilly et al. (2012: 102) reported displeasure amongst students feeling “‘out of the loop’ and isolated in their first online courses”. Since Falchikov & Boud (2007) argued that the way feedback is communicated may mitigate its negative emotional impact, it is likely that in an online environment, feedback might be a particularly salient site for an exploration of the positive and negative affects surrounding students’ interactions with technology.

This project explored EdD students’ affective responses to the online environment, and the impact of the introduction of screencasting technology to communicate assessment feedback. A preliminary survey was distributed to the students to ascertain the range and intensity of feelings they routinely

experienced whilst learning online. Jing™ screencasting technology was then introduced as a way of giving audio-visual feedback on one of the module assignments. Following this, students were interviewed via Skype about how they felt about learning online and, in particular, their affective responses to technology used to deliver feedback. The results indicated that online learning produces a complex range of affective responses, and the effective combination of technology and pedagogic approach can influence a greater sense of teacher and social presence for the students.

The interview data was analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to reveal positive and negative affects surrounding embodiment and communication online, academic demands of the course, time pressures, relationship with feedback, and the technological environment. However, in order to put the themes into context, techniques of narrative analysis (Cortazzi, 2008) were also applied, indicating the ways that the different students interpreted their experiences. Paying attention to the narrative functions of orientation and evaluation that participants use in relating their experience revealed the depth and complexity of their affective responses.

In conclusion, the paper argues that critical reflection on students' affective responses to the online environment should inform the use of technology within online education. Such an approach has implications for the way we design the online environment to allow students to experience the full potential of online learning.

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