Chapter XLIII
A Scale of Affective Satisfaction in Online Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with research on the development and use of an assessment instrument for measuring affective satisfaction in online learning. The research used a One-Way Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) design, and the measure was students' perceived affective community satisfaction. An increasing mean score trend combined with positive qualitative feedback provided indicators of an overall growth in students' perceived affective community satisfaction worthy of further investigation. Data was collected at the college level, although it has important implications for online socio-technical design at all education levels.

Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not a preparation for life but is life itself

—John Dewey

BACKGROUND

In the literature, affect is defined as attitudes, motivation, and values; the expression of which often involves statements of opinions, beliefs, or an assessment of worth (Smith & Ragan, 1999). For this chapter, the affective learning community refers to creating a positive social emotional design to provide an environment conducive to influences of new ideas, knowledge, and experiences for building the collec-tive knowledge base. Through social interactions the affective learning environment has the potential to tap into individuals' social emotional learning needs, by developing and maintaining motivation, caring, comfort, support, trust, acceptance, respect, group identification, and attachment to foster a productive learning community. By examining the underlying social structures we will be in a better position to work towards affective socio-technical designs for learning.

The study examined whether online college students' Perceived Affective Community scores increase across time after exposure to affective guideline interventions. Knowing more about what is needed to create a socially successful learning environment can be used when designing and redesigning effective courses, especially with the current growth of online learning. The study sought to find ways of engaging students in building a socially successful affective online learning community through specific targeted intervention guidelines including practice and assessment activities. The goal was to find ways to improve the quality and effectiveness of learning within the social context of online socio-technical design.

It is critical to focus on the affective needs of the members, whether personal, professional, or social, in order to enhance the learning process, as "the power of a learning community is even greater, as it supports the intellectual as well as personal growth and develop of its members" (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 163). Through the developing relationships and interactions, knowledge is primarily generated. Active, focused, relevant, meaningful, quality interactions assist students in meeting their personal needs and reaching their learning goals.

From personal experience and observations, an online threaded discussion forum provides a dynamic social environment where individuals may work collaboratively to both share and create new knowledge. Computer mediated online dialogue provides many opportunities for students to experience a real-world learning community with participants both observing and interacting to gain new knowledge. With proper interventions, students excel by making needed social and academic connections with peers.

Affective community behaviors relate to the core values and beliefs the individuals hold, supporting and affirming each student's self-image. By fostering a positive affective online environment, the individual's self-worth may be reaffirmed, by setting into play guidelines for fostering a positive learning environment to support the individual's affective emotional needs. Everyone wants to be cared about and respected for the unique perspective and contributions we make. Creating a learning environment where diversity of all opinions is appreciated and respected helps to build a positive, successful, and rewarding learning community.

Historically, cognitive theory has been used in an effort to increase learning gains. Recent findings in "neuroscience, psychology, and cognitive science itself present affect as complexly intertwined with thinking and performing important functions with respect to guiding rational behavior, memory retrieval, decision-making, creativity, and more" (Picard, et al., 2004, p.1). Too much emotion can interfere with productive learning. Too little emotion can also have a negative impact on the learning process. Students, who are "anxious, angry, or depressed do not learn; people who are caught in these states do not take in information efficiently" (Picard, et al., 2004, p. 5). "When basic mechanisms of emotion are missing in the brain, then intelligent functioning is hindered" (Picard, et al., 2004, p. 1). Learning in the online environment is not purely a cognitive function but rather a combination of both affective and cognitive. Changes in emotional states can allow different types of learning to occur.

Research has found a slight positive mood helps one to feel better and "induce different kinds of thinking, characterized by a tendency toward greater creativity and flexibility in problem solving, as well as more efficiency and thoroughness in decision making" (Picard, et al., 2004, p. 2). Physical evidence of the different emotional states evidenced in the brain show "different patterns of blood flow, providing one possible explanation for how affect influences brain activity" (Picard, et al., 2004, p. 2). It is important to keep in mind it is still not known exactly which emotions influence learning, thereby emphasizing the need to create and refine better assessment tools and continue to conduct research-based analysis. Positive intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, goal direction, valued contributions, and social emotional caring can help students to develop the needed positive identity for building a productive affective learning community (Picard, et al., 2004, p. 3).

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