Chapter 8

How Is Your Connection?
Integrating Social and Emotional Learning Into Online Course Design

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ABSTRACT

Traditional course design assumes a synchronous, in-person learning environment and relies on a skilled instructor to observe nonverbal communication and guide interactions between learners. However, the nature of online learning has changed instructor-student connections so that providing real-time, guided interactions and feedback are not always practical. The loss of these interactions has particularly affected social and emotional learning (SEL), or how people recognize and manage emotions, empathize with, and relate to others, and make responsible decisions. SEL—popularly known as emotional intelligence, EI, or EQ—has gained recognition as the foundation of vital "soft skills" that contribute to improved job satisfaction, performance, and productivity. When institutions simply convert in-person curricula to digital, the resulting online courses often do not account for the loss of real-time SEL and metacognitive guidance from an instructor. This chapter provides guidance on how to integrate SEL into the design of online courses.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional course design assumes a synchronous, in-person learning environment and relies on a skilled instructor to observe nonverbal communication and guide interactions between learners (Alam & Ahmad, 2018). However, the nature of online learning has changed instructor–student connections so that real-time, guided interactions and feedback are not always practical and, at the very least, must be reimagined for the online learning environment (Adnan, Kalelioglu, & Gulbahar, 2017; Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018; Trammell & LaForge, 2017). To illustrate the differences between traditional and online learning environments, consider the following hypothetical user narratives.

User Narrative One: In-Person Learning Environment

Kulpana sits at her desk; it's the first day of class, and she feels nervous. She can see that the other students feel nervous, too. She strikes up a conversation with Michael, the student sitting next to her. They discuss the weather and joke about their shared new-class anxiety. The instructor, Ms. Chandler, walks into the room, smiles at the class, and introduces herself. Ms. Chandler seems warm and approachable, which sets Kulpana at ease. While they are all reading from the first chapter of the textbook, Michael starts to fidget—he looks confused. Ms. Chandler stops reading and acknowledges him, asking if he's doing OK. Tentatively, he explains his confusion and asks a clarifying question. Ms. Chandler smiles and says, "That's a great question. Can anyone help him out?" The students start to discuss his question and, after several minutes, collaboratively create an explanation that resolves Michael's question. The class checks in with Michael to confirm his understanding. He looks much more relaxed and responds with an enthusiastic, "Yes, I get it now. Thanks, everyone!" This classroom interaction sets a precedent for collaborative help that grows over the semester. Students watch out for each other, and if they see signs of struggle in their peers, they intervene to offer help, explain a concept, or bring questions to the class to discuss together until everyone reaches understanding.

User Narrative Two: Online Learning Environment

Kulpana sits at her desk; it's the first day of class, and she feels nervous. She has received an email instructing her to complete an eLearning module prior to attending a synchronous web session. She opens her laptop and logs in to the online learning platform. The eLearning module is short and clinical. She has a few small questions about the material, but there's no help feature in the platform. She debates whether to email her questions to the course instructor, whose contact information is included in her course registration email but decides it's not worth the effort. Five minutes before the web session, she clicks a link to enter the virtual classroom. She sees a presentation slide with basic course information in the course viewer. She connects her microphone and says a tentative "Hello?" but receives no answer. The roster shows that someone named Michael is also logged in, but his microphone is muted. She waits in awkward silence for the session to start, eventually filling the quiet by checking email on the side. At the start time, the instructor, Ms. Chandler, welcomes the class. The sound of a voice startles Kulpana—she had become so distracted by emails that she hadn't noticed anyone else enter the virtual classroom. Trying to refocus, Kulpana scans the virtual classroom. There are no videos or images of the other students. Ms. Chandler starts reading from the first presentation slide, eventually stopping to ask if there are questions. In the silence that follows, Kulpana considers raising her questions about the eLearning module assignment; however, just as she clicks to unmute her microphone, Ms. Chandler resumes presenting the course content. When the web session ends, Kulpana becomes acutely aware that she's sitting alone at a computer. She feels isolated and frustrated by the online class experience. Over the rest of the semester, Kulpana's learning materials are mostly eLearning modules, about which she continues to have questions, but growing anxiety and a sense of disconnection discourages her from emailing her instructor. Compounding questions and confusion fuel her anxiety, and she becomes increasingly disengaged.

Compare these two scenarios: What were Kulpana's experiences in each? How might Ms. Chandler and Michael have experienced these scenarios differently? How were each person's social and emotional

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