

Chapter 4

Dealing with Affective Needs in E-Learning: Contrasting Two Cases, in Two Cultures

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents and contrasts descriptions of two cases of online affective support provided to support students engaged in higher level learning tasks. The cases are set in different cultures, centre upon different intended learning outcomes, and follow different tutorial styles. One (Eastern) tutor acted as a “shepherd leader” in response to needs arising in the Confucian Heritage Culture as the teacher promoted critical thinking, according to the Western model. The other (Western) tutor provided Rogerian facilitation of reflective learning journals, kept by students seeking to develop personal and professional capabilities. In both styles, affective support features strongly. The cultural and pedagogical comparisons between the cases have proved useful to the writers. These distinctions together with the similarities between the two online styles emerge in the comparisons.

BACKGROUND

Following the energetic and thorough consideration of the cognitive domain by Bloom and his colleagues (Bloom et al, 1956), the natural desire to move on to deal similarly with the affective domain ran into considerable and well-documented problems (Krathwohl et al, 1964). The result was that, for the next 40 years, affective outcomes in higher education received scant attention. Indeed

a sampling of popular texts used in the training of UK university teachers (Cowan, 2005), found that only two made mention of the affective domain or of affective outcomes. One devoted a marginal sentence to this topic (MacDonald, 1997, in Boud et al, 1997); the other (Heywood, 2000) referred to the almost unique practices of Alverno College (Mentkowski, 2000).

Recent publications addressing the importance of affective outcomes (Robinson & Katalushi, 2005) concentrate usefully and worthily on the hitherto neglected and important area of values and ethics

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(Barnett, 2003). But direct consideration of affective learning outcomes and learning needs, and of tutorial approaches to respond appropriately and effectively to them, are difficult to unearth (Cowan, 2005, p 161). Affective outcomes having been neglected in this way and to this extent, affective learning needs (and supportive teaching) feature only in writings which report pastoral concerns and their resolution. Fry et al (2000), while including a generous chapter on support and guidance by Wallace (2000), make guidance, rather than the fundamental support of learning and development, the selected focus of their advice. Biggs and Tang (2007) index no mentions of “affective”, “needs” or “support”. Eysenck and Piper (1987), in the closing pages of an authoritative although early text (Richardson et al, 1987), made the telling comment that “cognitive psychologists rarely consider motivational or emotional factors at all, a factor which one of these writers had recently bemoaned.”

However, interest in affective needs has recently awakened, or re-awakened. Even as the final draft of this chapter was being refined by its writers, Huyton’s (2009) paper “support and development needs of HE tutors engaged in the emotion work associated with supporting students” cites Beard’s work in helping students to “develop a better understanding of the energies and challenges involved in coming to terms with studying” (Beard et al, 2007, p250). While Huyton (2009) concentrates on the emotional well-being and support of tutors, she usefully reminds readers of the earlier work by Earwaker (1992), stressing, as do the present writers, that learning support should be based on a pedagogy which recognises and takes account of the effects on learners of personal change. Earwaker (2009) drew a firm distinction between counselling and Rogers’ (1980) position of providing learning support which involves both the emotional and the cognitive, and the act of professional counselling.

The present writers remain committed to Rogers’ ideal of unified learning in which the cognitive, experiential and affective are melded (Rogers, 1980). Therefore they do not pursue here the concept of “therapeutic pedagogy” (Ecclestone, 2004: p118). Rather do they offer their cases to this anthology aware that they have been engaging with a relatively neglected topic and challenge.

Circumstances brought the two writers together as strangers, when John was reviewing a paper by Jean (Chiu, 2009) prior to publication. They found common ground, and began to correspond electronically, contrasting the cultures in which they supported their students’ development in e-learning and online interactions. It became clear that they shared concerns regarding their students’ affective needs, although following somewhat different approaches to providing support. Jean’s pedagogy centred on shepherd leadership within a learning community (Chiu, 2007); John followed a Rogerian approach (Cowan, 2004) on a distinctly individual basis.

This chapter is a joint response to the request for cases dealing with e-learning. The writers are both firmly committed to the view that effectiveness in the provision of e-learning depends to a great extent on the prompt identification, and effective resolution, of students’ affective needs. They therefore relate their contrasting experiences in two distinct cases, identify the issues and lessons emergent from them, and report their responses, present and intended. Each narrative account is assembled under sub-headings following the same sequence as is used in the comparison. In accordance with the somewhat detailed sub-headings which will be used in the comparative section, “ANALYSIS OF THIS COMPARISON”, to enable the reader to compare the writers’ experiences. The sub-sections for each case are titled accordingly.

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