Lighting up and transforming online courses: Letting the teacher's personality shine

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Affective aspects of learning have been shown to influence cognitive aspects of learning (Russo & Benson, 2005; Salmon, 2004) and online educators are increasingly aware of the role played by emotions in online learning. To encourage a well-rounded online learning experience for students, online course designers have long been encouraged to provide students with opportunities to express their own personality and identity (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Such design features have been linked with improved learning outcomes and decreased attrition rates (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). However, a comparable discussion about the value of teacher personality in online courses has yet to be comprehensively considered beyond definitions and discussions of teacher presence. Although the development of teacher presence in online learning contexts can contribute in some way to the development of an online atmosphere where the teacher's role extends beyond the cognitive coach or resource provider, the role of teacher personality is yet to be fully acknowledged as an aspect of the virtual classroom that could further enhance and transform students' learning experiences. Rather than suggesting which offline personality type would best suit an online teaching role, this paper suggests that teachers should have the opportunity to express their personality in online learning contexts. By acknowledging this nexus between online and offline identities, the paper provides the grounding from which to frame and launch future investigations into how diverse teacher personalities can be allowed to shine in the online environment and, consequently, transform and enhance online experiences for future students *and* online teachers.

Keywords: online learning, teacher personality, teacher presence

Introduction

Online educators are increasingly aware of the role played by emotions in online learning and understand that high quality learning cannot be achieved through the provision of content alone. Affective aspects of learning have been shown to influence cognitive aspects of learning (Russo & Benson, 2005; Salmon, 2004). As any experienced online learner or teacher knows, much of the online learning or teaching experience is closely connected with the development of online teacher-student and student-student relationships. These relationships can form the basis of learning processes by enabling students to connect their ideas to the ideas of others, to gain a holistic understanding of their discipline through collaborating with others, and by communicating with their teachers and other experts. The formation of learning and teaching relationships in online learning environments may be associated with the presence or otherwise of teacher and learner personalities (Anderson-Wilk, 2010; Harrington & Loffredoa, 2010) and the merging of personal and educational spaces and tools (Fitzgerald & Steele, 2008). Whether or not students and teachers are provided with opportunities to express their personalities in online environments can impact upon the emotional and social climate of an online course.

The role of personality in online learning contexts

Although personality is difficult to describe and measure, it is considered to be significant in determining what makes a person an individual (Feist, 1998). Research about the role of personality in online learning contexts has largely been focused, to date, on the personality of students – how their personality suits or does not suit the online environment, how students should be given opportunities to express their unique personalities in online learning contexts and how teachers can acknowledge varied student personalities in online courses (Chen & Caropreso, 2004; Harrington & Loffredoa, 2010; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Thorpe, 2002). In terms of online learning contexts, personality could be described as the expression of a person's unique traits and characteristics that define them as an individual in an online learning context.

To encourage a well-rounded online learning experience for students, online course designers are encouraged to provide students with opportunities to express their own personality and identity: "A student also has the choice of how they present themselves, and can to some extent manipulate the kind of personality they present through their words and actions" (Thorpe, 2002, p. 113). This has been recommended as a useful strategy for creating a holistic online learning environment in which both the cognitive and emotional aspects of learning are acknowledged and promoted. Such personality-focused design features have been linked with improved learning outcomes and decreased attrition rates (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004, p. 77). Furthermore, the value of providing students with opportunities to personalise their online learning space has been connected with improvements in the quality of learning and the degree to which students enact self-directedness (McLoughlin & Lee, 2009).

Some research has also been reported on the types of student personalities that are most suited to online learning. For example, Anderson and Elloumi (2004) found that students approached online learning environments differently depending on whether their personalities were considered to be field-dependent (students who approach their environment in a global way) or field-independent (students who approach their environment analytically). Another study has shown that introverted students prefer online learning to face-to-face learning and, furthermore, that students can experience negative consequences if their personality is seriously mismatched with the type of online delivery offered (Harrington & Loffredoa, 2010). In terms of communication preferences and personality, Chen and Caropreso's study investigated how students' personalities impact on their online discussion activities (2004) and found that best practice involves combining students with varied personality types for optimal learning results. Other researchers have noted the value of acknowledging the different personalities of students in online courses (Johnson & Aragon, 2002).

Overall, personality is cited as being an important factor in the establishment of a constructive online learning atmosphere. In spite of this, the research available on the topic has largely been focused on issues associated with students' personalities, linking them with both learning styles and learning outcomes (Bellon & Oates, 2002; Chen & Caropreso, 2004). Although much work has been done over the last few decades on how a teacher's personality can influence face-to-face classes (Feldman, 1986; Kent & Fisher, 1997; Tschechtelin, 1951), little research has investigated how a teacher can best express his or her personality in an *online* teaching context. Despite this apparent dearth in the literature to date, McLoughlin and Lee (2009, p. 643) have acknowledged that online learning environments need to be personalised for both instructors *and* students.

Teacher presence and teacher personality

Previous research into face-to-face learning in higher education has shown that the quality of higher education learning environments can be influenced by the expression of teacher's personality (Feldman, 1986; Kent & Fisher, 1997; Tschechtelin, 1951) and the acknowledgement of both cognitive and affective aspects of education, including the expression of student personality traits (Rodrguez, Plax, & Kearney, 1996). However, a comparable dialogue about the value of teacher personality in *online* courses, to complement and parallel discussions of student personality in online learning, has yet to be comprehensively considered beyond issues associated with *teacher presence*.

Online learning has sometimes been criticised for lacking "warmth" (Terry Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001) and has, at times, been blamed for the "dehumanisation" of learning

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(Etherington, 2008, p. 30), especially in the pioneering days of online learning late last century. To counteract such claims, online educators have begun to pay more attention to creating online persona to signify the presence of the online teacher (Baker, 2004; Dringus, Snydera, & Terrella, 2010). Online teachers are encouraged to develop "invitational" rather than "disinvitational" courses that provide students with holistic experiences in which both instructors and students collaborate to learn (Paxton, 2003). Research into the value of teacher presence and the interplay between cognitive and affective learning processes indicates that the teacher's role in online learning contexts encompasses more than intellectual guidance (Bender, 2003; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Olson, 2002). In her paper addressing the role of social presence theory in online contexts, Gunawardena (1995) also emphasises how the moderator or teacher has a vital role in affecting the quality of online interaction. This re-focus on the teacher can be seen as a way to counteract the way a teacher's role has been overlooked in the online environment, as lamented by Anderson-Wilk (2010) "Interestingly, the personal style of the educator is often devalued as the culture of learner focus has grown." While such a movement does not advocate a renewed emphasis on teacher-centredness, it does underline the importance of the teacher's role in creating an affectively effective online learning environment that can facilitate high quality, holistic student-centred learning. This and the previously mentioned research highlights how future online learning instructors can transform online learning environments by expressing their personality beyond the provision of mere resources, information and curricula; to fulfil the roles of cognitive coach, empathetic guide and respectful educator. Just as interaction is not enough to achieve a sense of teacher presence in online learning contexts (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005), so too teacher presence is not enough to establish a teacher's personality online.

Personality is a vital component of the complex mélange of teaching and learning processes; though it is quite an intangible component that is difficult to measure. Nevertheless, things that are difficult to measure are often the most significant ingredients of a high quality potion. The articulation of the nature and role of teacher personality in online courses should not be overlooked or brushed under the virtual carpet. Instead, an exploration of how the expression and presence of a teacher's personality online may be a much needed step for transforming online courses in order to enact more benefits for online students of the future.

The expression of teacher personality in online learning and teaching contexts may lead to instructors adopting increased ownership of their courses in terms of preparation and design, delivery and facilitation, and evaluation. In turn, these results may improve the quality of the course and students' experience of the course. Greater expression of teacher personality may also lead to increased online opportunities for teacher and student humour to surface which has been documented and found to be helpful in face-to-face contexts (Garner, 2006).

Whether or not the teacher possesses an extrovert or an introvert personality in non-virtual life does not matter. What does matter is whether or not the teacher's personality is given the chance to shine in virtual learning environments in order to enhance realistic interactivity, to increase social connectedness with students and to build a well-rounded online experience that is satisfying for both students *and* teachers.

Future research directions

To continue to transform online learning environments to meet the needs of future students and teachers, the role of teacher personality in online learning contexts needs to be defined and explored. More investigation is required to document examples, to examine the characteristics and to investigate student reactions to expressions of teacher personality in online learning environments. Future research into teacher personality may suggest ways in which online curricula can be transformed to better meet the needs of our current and future students, and how the affordances of technology can be used to make online curricula relevant to our current and future online learners, and more satisfying and personally defining for our current and future online teachers.

Conclusion

Although the pendulum of focus that oscillates between student-centred and teacher-centred learning has again rested on student-centred learning in recent years, an investigation into teacher personality in

online learning contexts does not endorse a resurgence of teacher-centredness. Instead, such research may serve to enhance student-centredness by providing a more welcoming, comfortable and holistic online learning atmosphere.

Rather than suggesting which personality type would best suit an online teaching role, this paper asserts that teachers should have the opportunity to express their personality in online learning contexts. The paper provides a grounding from which to launch future investigations into how diverse teacher personalities can shine in the online environment and, consequently, transform and enhance online experiences for both students *and* teachers.

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Please cite as: Northcote, M. (2010). Lighting up and transforming online courses: Letting the teacher's personality shine. In C.H. Steel, M.J. Keppell, P. Gerbic & S. Housego (Eds.), *Curriculum, technology & transformation for an unknown future. Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2010* (pp.694-698). https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2010.2073