Using emotional intelligence as a basis for developing an online faculty guide for emotional awareness

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Abstract

Online learning has incorporated its way into nearly every type of college, university or workplace. In the past, the educational environment was restricted to in-seat types of classrooms, distance learning, independent study, or purely lecture, therefore giving the faculty member a face-to-face encounter with the students. With increasing technological availabilities, this is no longer the case and faculty members are left to attempt to interpret a student’s emotional components of learning. The following concept paper explores the emotional awareness levels of faculty teaching online courses, and what it means for the future of online education.

Introduction

Almost every type of college, university or workplace, online learning has incorporated itself into training, education and day-to-day business (Browning, 2010). Whether it is an online university course or a continuing education credit, the ability to further one’s skills and knowledge can be done with the click of mouse. With this rise in online student learning opportunities, online faculty members are facing a new set of challenges when it comes to demonstrating their own emotions, while at the same time interpreting student’s emotions.

One area that has very little research is online faculty and their levels of Emotional Intelligence (EI). Basically, EI refers to the ability to recognize emotions and then regulating them within ourselves and others (Nooraei & Arasi, 2011). Faculty who begin a career of online teaching are trained in a variety of ways (Browning, 2010). In many cases, faculty will have to participate in some form of orientation or training program, as part of their hiring process. However, most of this training focuses on academic issues such as plagiarism or how to appropriately answer a discussion forum question, but primarily educate the faculty member to the university’s policies and procedures. Rarely is there a guide for online faculty on how to handle emotional situations, how to interpret a student’s emotions within the course room, or even to be aware of their own levels of EI. In fact, Coghlan (2001) says that we should not make the assumption that faculty members will automatically be aware of how to act or communicate online.

The current study is based on research that recommends the exploration of the challenges experienced by online faculty, which includes of the emotional aspects of online learning (McKnight, 2010). Therefore, this study used research and online faculty perceptions to explore the emotional intelligence of online faculty in hopes of developing an online faculty guide to
becoming emotionally aware of the emotions of self and their students. It explores online faculty’s interpretations of emotions, response styles and the development of appropriate methods to define and identify best practices. It also begins to integrate psychological aspects of online learning by working with faculty who don’t know the appropriate way to express their emotions in an online environment. A list of strategies were created to give the online faculty member an introductory guide for how to more effectively become emotionally aware of their students, while maintaining the academic integrity of the coursework.

Methods

An online faculty emotional awareness survey was created and distributed to 100 individuals who facilitated course for two private universities. The survey was created in order to explore the perceptions of an online faculty member’s own emotional awareness, and the emotional awareness of their online students. Both of the universities offer traditional face-to-face courses, as well as online and blended courses and rely heavily on adjunct faculty to teach a majority of their online courses. One university is located in the Northern Western part of the United States, while the second is located in the Midwestern region.

Online faculty received an email requesting their participation in completing a survey regarding faculty and students’ emotional awareness, as well as a qualitative component asking for feedback on online education. Of the 100 distributed electronic surveys, fifty-two online faculty completed the survey (N=52). The online faculty reported less than 1 year, to 10 years of online teaching experience, and taught a variety of course subjects.

Results

The faculty that completed the survey had a wide range of years of experience teaching online courses. The years of experience ranged from less than 1 year to 10 plus years. 32% of the faculty reported having 1-3 years experience; 28% having 4-6 years experience, 22% having 7-9 years experience, and 14% having less than 1 year. Only 4% of the faculty had 10 or over years of experience. The online faculty associated themselves with different types of educational institutions, such as private 4-year institution, public 4-year institution, community college, online university, or faith-based university. 54% of the faculty that completed the survey reported they worked for a private 4-year university, whereas only 28% said they worked for an online university.

Of the faculty surveyed 75% of them reported that frustration was the most common type of emotion they experience while teaching an online class. 90% of the faculty reported that anxiety was the most common emotional experience that their students experience. To respond to their students’ emotional needs, 98% stated they would send a personal email and provide encouragement. When asked how students express their emotions within the online course room, 87% of faculty reported that the student will send an email, either positive or negative, in nature. Many will also attempt to gain support from their fellow cohorts.
The survey allowed for online faculty to also provide comments, feedback or suggestions. This narrative component allowed the faculty to explore their own emotions as well as their online students’. Below is a brief description of several of the questions and the faculty’s comments:

_How do you express your emotions when teaching an online class?_

The online faculty that completed the survey reported a variety of ways they express their emotions during the course of the online class. Faculty reported expressing emotions through helpful and open communication either through a class announcement or personal and confidential email. One faculty reported that letting the students know that they are a “real” person too and that all humans have faults. They felt that this was a good way to find a common bond.

_What types of emotions do you feel unprepared to handle?_

The participants described several emotions that they felt unprepared to handle. There were instances in which one emotion was named by numerous faculty as well. Three faculty reported that they didn’t expect such extreme and inappropriate anger, or how to handle it. Three faculty stated that their students were so full of rage that they were unprepared as to what to do with such emotion. In five instances, faculty discussed that there were difficult emotions that were out of their realm of expertise, such as severe depression, suicidal thoughts, or extreme difficulty life situations such as rape or drugs. Other faculty reported that several students implied that the faculty didn’t care about their success or failure in the course, even to the point of demonstrating resentment and anger. Finally, online faculty found that in their experiences teaching online courses, most students are faced with anxiety and fear.

_What kind of training do you feel would benefit you as it relates to identifying online student emotions?_

When it came to training and continuing education, online faculty members felt they could use some assistance in several areas. One of those areas was how to express to students their level of disclosure of personal information. Training that involved how to respond to the level of intimacy that students portray within an online environment would be recommended, to allow faculty to compare the levels of disclosure between an online class and a face-to-face class. Another suggestion would be to have training in psychological disorders, symptom recognition, and how to appropriately deal with emotional situations. Faculty reported that they often serve as the role of “counselor”, and they are not prepared to take on that role. Having an awareness of the “red flags” or cries for help, would enable faculty to know when intervention was appropriate. A final recommendation made by online faculty is to have a guide for not only them, but the students. Giving online students information on what to expect from an online course could be crucial to their success. This is more than the academic portion of what to expect, but an inclusion of the types of feelings, emotions and behaviors that an online student may go through.
Discussion

Ultimately, this study was based as a concept paper to explore the emotional awareness levels of faculty who teach online courses. After administering the self-report survey, several themes arose. One theme suggests that online faculty members are aware of their emotional responses while teaching in the online environment. They appear to be concerned and care about their online student’s emotional needs. If they realize they are having emotions of frustration, they handle themselves in professional and academic manners.

As a result of this theme, one strategy that can be used to encourage online faculty to maintain emotional awareness is to seek supervision. Having a supervisor that can look at both sides of a situation from an outside perspective may give the online faculty member a different view of their emotions. This may be a direct faculty supervisor, or someone from the university’s counseling center, or including a designee from Student Services. One faculty member surveyed reported that they try to keep negative emotions out of their communications, but that sometimes it may be difficult. Another reported that if necessary, they would seek recommendations from their university’s counselor.

A second theme indicates that there are several emotions displayed by students that online faculty are not prepared to handle. The most common type of emotion described can be described as clinical: depression, anxiety, suicidal expressions. Closely following those emotions are anger, rage, and resentment.

Creating a strategy to identify and prepare to handle student’s clinical issues should be addressed before the course begins. This strategy could be in the form of a training video explaining the different examples of student’s emotions. One surveyed faculty member stated that they were unprepared for the level of anger and rage displayed by their student. They were concerned because the probably of the student displaying those emotions in a face-to-face class would more than likely be low. Faculty members recommended listing “hot button” words that would signal to the faculty member that the student was close to projective emotions like rage and frustration. Creating a “netiquette” video on the proper ways to communicate and express emotions and feelings via the internet and online classes would give both faculty and students baseline knowledge of how to identify their own emotions and the emotions in others.

A third theme proposed by the comments from online faculty includes the need for additional training in mental health symptom identification. Several faculty hinted to the fact that they take on a “counseling” role, and have not been trained in clinical psychology or counseling.

One strategy to assist online faculty in their task of working with online students is to develop a guide to emotional awareness. This guide would provide basic psychological information on emotions, mental illness, substance abuse awareness, and a description of when a student may be
at risk. For example, the guide should contain the definition of anxiety with examples of some psychological and physiological symptoms that accompany it. Clinicians are aware that the American Psychological Association (2007) defines anxiety as a form of apprehension that can be accompanied by somatic and psychological symptoms of tension, in which a person may anticipate misfortune, catastrophe or impending danger. As an example of the information readily available to faculty, the emotional awareness guide is listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Emotional Awareness Guide Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional Red Flags</th>
<th>Potential Disorder</th>
<th>Symptoms</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words like:</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>• Apprehension</td>
<td>If the student is experiencing anxiety, the main goal is to ease their tension. Anxious students expect immediate contact and response and become uneasy when faced with the unknown. Give your student boundaries with set office hours and a time frame from which you will reply to email, grade, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I’m worried.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Thoughts of impending doom or dread</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I’m scared.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Anticipation of the worst possible outcome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• My stomach hurts when you don’t reply instantly.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words like:</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>• Feelings of hopelessness</td>
<td>Depression is a mental illness in which someone may feel hopeless, beyond typical “feeling blue”. For the student who has made comments that lead faculty to believe they are within the realm of hurting themselves, they should contact their supervisor immediately. Provide the student with the University’s Counseling Center or Suicide Hotline at 1-800-SUICIDE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I can’t stop crying.</td>
<td>Possible suicidal thoughts</td>
<td>• Weight gain/loss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It just seems hopeless.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sleeplessness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I’m losing weight because I’m so upset.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Thoughts of hurting self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I just don’t want to go on anymore.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feelings of worthlessness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Loss of interest in pleasurable activates.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If student does not appear at-risk for suicide, then encourage them to find support through the University Counseling Center, friends or family, or ask their family.
Procuring a working relationship with the university’s counseling center would be a strategy to promote positive mental health in both the faculty and the student. Creating online information links or pamphlets about such psychological issues of substance abuse, anxiety, and depression would allow the faculty to provide the student with the resources to direct them to the path of help and recovery. Having a direct link to the university’s counseling center can provide students with immediate contact information, such as the suicide hotline, signs and symptoms of mental illness, as well as information for students or faculty who has family members suffering from psychological illnesses.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

With the popularity of online coursework, it is inevitable that future research will include the affective component of online education. It is also expected that the research will be faced with limitations.

One limitation of the study was the lack of participation of online faculty. Over 100 requests for survey completion was made, but only 52 recorded their survey responses. Future research will explore greater numbers of online faculty and record their emotional responses. A second limitation of the study was the lack of participation with public 4-year universities and community colleges. This could be due to the fact that many of the faculty who completed the survey works for several of the types of educational intuitions, not just one in particular, which could skew the results. Future recommendations involve focusing on one particular type of university at a time and assessing their emotional awareness.

A final recommendation for future research is to develop an emotional awareness guide for online faculty to use in the identification of and ideal response given, for specific emotions that are appearing in online education. For example, a large proportion of online faculty reported they weren’t prepared to handle the extreme anger and rage that online students portray within the online course room. An effective guide will coach online faculty into the identification of aggressive statements, how to deescalate angry and raging students, and redirect their aggression into productive behaviors within the course room.
References


McKnight, J.L. (2010). The comparative impact of face-to-face instruction and video conferencing instruction on students’ anxiety levels. Capella University, Minneapolis, MN.


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