University of Pretoria etd – Meyer, S M (2005)

An investigation into the affective experiences of students in an online learning environment

A doctoral thesis
by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Philosophiae Doctor (Computer Integrated Education)

in the

Faculty of Education
University of Pretoria

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February 2005

Learning is never only cognitive – feelings or attitudes go hand in hand with intellect. One's emotions or feelings also affect the quality of one's learning.
(Van der Horst & McDonald 2001)

Summary

Affective learning forms part of all kinds of educational experiences, regardless of whether the primary focus of learning is on the psychomotor or the cognitive domain. When students are exposed to these different types of educational experiences, their feelings or emotions will be stirred (Bastable 2003: 333).

The aim of this study was to investigate the affective experiences of students who were enrolled for an online module, as part of their study programme. The study specifically aimed to investigate the meanings that students attached to their affective experiences during the module.

The rationale of this study was based on the fact that students have affective experiences that influence their decision to persevere with a course. The purpose of this study was thus to explore and interpret the participants' affective experiences in an online learning environment and to discover important categories of meaning (Marshall & Rossman 1999:33).

The basis for the study was the fifth module of a two-year tutored master's degree in computer-assisted education. This module, with its focus on e-learning, was presented entirely online for a period of six weeks. A game was played in cyberspace; and as the learning experiences of participants were based on surfing the Web, the game was called *CyberSurfiver.* In the e-learning environment, participants had to interact and communicate mainly by means of e-mail, Internet groups, and the online learning platform *WebCT*. Participants could also communicate synchronously by means of the Internet-based synchronous tool called *Yahoo! Messenger*.

A qualitative approach was used for this research. A case study was chosen as a design for this study because it reflects *particularistic*, *descriptive* and *heuristic* characteristics. On the one hand, the case study could be related to the online culture but, on the other hand, the study aimed at interpreting meaning attached to experiences within the online culture. This study can be seen as falling within the *constructivist-hermeneutic-interpretivist-qualitative paradigm*.

In this study, two focus group interviews were used as the principal method of data collection. The main purpose of the focus group interviews was to collect data about the affective experiences of participants.

The first category identified during the data analysis and coding process of this study was called *Curative Factors*. The second category was called *Process of Affective Development*. It was concluded that the participants' affective development could be compared to the levels of Krathwohl's Taxonomy. The participants' affective development were further assessed by means of a learning cycle model developed by Kort and Reilly (2002a:60-61). A third category namely *Inhibiting Factors* was identified.

The findings of this study emphasise the importance of the recognition of the holistic nature of the online students and their experiences, which imply that affective development cannot be separated from cognitive and psychomotor development.

Key concepts

- Affective experiences
- Emotion/s
- Feeling/s
- Online learning
- Online students
- Cooperative learning
- Learning environment
- Synchronous communication
- Asynchronous communication
- Altruism versus Individualism
- Internal drive
- Process of affective development
- Krathwohl's Taxonomy
- Affective learning cycle
- Inhibiting factors

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List Of Abbreviations

AAUW	American Association of University Women
ABSA	Amalgamated Banks of South Africa
ADSL	Broadband Internet access
CIE	Computer integrated education
CMC	Computer mediated communication
E-learning	Electronic learning
F2F	Face to face
FTP	Format Transfer Protocol
HTML	Hypertext mark-up language
HTTP	Hyper Text Transfer Protocol
ION	Illinois Online Network
IT	Information technology
MA	Magister Artium (Master of Arts)
MEd (CAE)	Master's Degree in Education (Computer Assisted Education)
MS	Microsoft
RSI	Repetitive Strain Injury
SMS	Short message service/system
URL	Uniform resource locator
WWW	World Wide Web