



Once More with Feeling: The Hidden Challenge of Virtual Teaching

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**PRACTICE-BASED
PAPER**



ABSTRACT

A short editorial piece on the learning and teaching challenges brought about by COVID-19.

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Learning is an emotional business. For example, as a process, learning can often involve thrill, excitement, frustration or even struggle, as well as the possibility of success or failure. Subsequently, strong feelings and subsequent emotions are often aroused when learning. As well as feeling good and bad, emotions are also critical to our well-being and health. Therefore, the way learners feel during their learning experience is critical to their health and wellbeing. Teachers have a huge role to play in determining how learners feel when they learn. Furthermore, there will be occasions when learners convey their feelings to their teacher, either intentionally or otherwise. The ability to read, acknowledge and respond to learner feelings, particularly if those feelings are negative is a core component of effective teaching since it supports effective relationship building with learners, which may also be beneficial for their engagement. This ability might otherwise be labelled as 'emotional intelligence'.

If emotional intelligence is important in supporting student health and well-being, then it has never been more important than at the present time, following the Covid-19 induced virtual teaching revolution. The disturbing impact of Covid-19 on students' mental health has been uncovered by two recent surveys by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020), and the National Union of Students (NUS, 2020), in which more than 50% of those polled reported a deterioration in their mental health since the start of the 2020/21 academic year. Loneliness, depression, sadness, sleep problems and anxiety were reported to have increased markedly. Hence, it can be argued that there is a heightened need for teachers to use their emotional intelligence to read and respond to learner feelings when teaching virtually. However, how easy is it to read, acknowledge and respond to learner feelings when teaching them via a screen? Especially when those learners have their cameras turned off, microphones muted and their only means of communication is via a text chat function? Virtual teaching makes it more difficult for teachers to use their emotional intelligence to build positive relationships with learners, and from a training and development perspective, this must be addressed.

Unfortunately, much of the training and development on offer for virtual teaching is technical in nature, focusing on making the most of the software used to deliver sessions remotely. A much greater focus should be placed on developing teachers to recognise, respond to, and manage emotions in learners as a means of building effective relationships with them. To do so may be beneficial to their engagement, but critically can support their health and wellbeing. HE needs to reframe what learning is and how it happens in the virtual environment, particularly the role that positive wellbeing plays in learning effectively, and the role emotions play in positive wellbeing. Learning is not a purely cognitive process, and intellect is not 'higher' than emotion in how the world is experienced and perceived. Recognition of such has never been more important to effective learning than it is now. Perhaps as teachers, it has never been more important for us to think less, and feel more.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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