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Emotion online: Experiences of teaching in a virtual learning environment

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ABSTRACT

Using qualitative data drawn from one specific instance of workplace virtuality and emotion – the experience of delivering online seminars using 'chat-rooms' – we explore how emotion was productively transformed through the use of virtuality in a teaching and learning setting, a workplace environment for thousands of academics. Using social constructivist and psychoanalytical theories of emotion, we discuss three emotional categories grounded in these data: 1) intimacy; 2) play; and 3) pride/shame, which were experienced in response to a range of student behaviours seemingly encouraged by the online seminar setting. We argue that the characteristics of virtuality as a medium of communication – namely the absence of the body, diminution of paralingual cues and removal of physical socio-spatial indicators – force a renegotiation of the 'feeling rules' that govern traditional classroom settings which in turn contributes to a more emotionally suffused teaching experience for online tutors. Given that the emotional experience of being an online *teacher* is notably under-theorized in the andragogic literature, our focus in this article is on the emotional implications of virtual teaching rather than virtual learning. We conclude by stating the need for further research into virtuality, emotion and teaching given the clear andragogical implications we discuss, the predicted rise in the use of virtual technologies as educational tools and the impact this may have on the emotional working lives of the academics who are called upon to mobilize them.

KEYWORDS

e-learning ▪ emotion ▪ grounded theory ▪ teaching ▪ virtuality ▪ work

Introduction

This article addresses the intersections between virtuality and emotion by examining one specific manifestation of these issues – the delivery of small group tutorials using the online 'chat-room' facility of WebCT, a widely used e-learning platform. Using this example, we analyse how teaching online has, for us, been a surprisingly intense emotional experience largely because of the virtual nature of the medium. We also consider that discussion concerning the relationship between emotion and learning online is less than fully informed. Although a body of sociological and psychological literature concerned with the impact of virtuality supports the potential for greater emotional expression online, there is still a paucity of research concerning the emotionality of online teaching that focuses on the experiences of online tutors.

Given these relative absences, our objectives for this study are twofold: 1) to explore the nature of our emotional responses to online teaching; and 2) to prompt further consideration as to how virtuality transforms many of the face-to-face interpersonal means by which feeling is formed and expressed – within a teaching and learning setting and speculatively, at work more broadly (Fineman, 2003). As such we engage in critical and theoretical reflection on the emotional impact of virtuality resulting from the bringing together of these two constructs. As part of this project contrasts between experiences of teaching online and teaching face-to-face are unavoidable – not least because this was repeatedly raised by our students as the most significant difference (for them) of participating in an online seminar, a theme that is threaded through the presentation of our data below. What we do not do in this article, however, is engage in a sustained comparative debate about online versus physical teaching approaches or, the emotional experience of teaching 'offline'. Our research agenda can therefore be summarized as follows: if, as Fineman (2003) suggests, virtuality reorganizes feeling within the environment of the workplace, how are such feelings also shared and shaped within an online *teaching* scenario – a workplace setting for thousands of academics? In particular, what is the specific nature of that reorganization and/or transformation of feeling for those who facilitate the learning process online?

It is important to note, right from the outset, that the term 'virtuality' is not a unified concept, but one riddled with theoretical complexities and contested understandings. Moreover, it is not a recent invention. The *Oxford English dictionary* (1989) traces the etymology of the word from 1483 as referring to a person who is endowed with virtue or power. A more contemporary understanding of virtuality as something disembodied, without

external form or physicality emerged somewhat later, around the mid-1600s, but it was not until the 1980s that virtuality became common parlance, colonized by the computer revolution and coming to mean something which is made to appear or exist via technology (Bennett et al., 2005). As Calcutt (1999) rightly reminds us, human beings have always engaged in practices of virtuality – creating worlds that do not exist in a physical or material sense – through writing, reading, art, the use of drugs, belief in religion and mysticism and so on. Thus, from the thrall of reading a gripping or heart-rending tale, to the rapture of fervent prayer and euphoria of intoxication, emotion and virtuality have always been entwined. Likewise, Baudrillard (1994) places virtuality at the very heart of everyday life, arguing that the external world we now apprehend is made up of simulations that are 'hyper-real'; mediated images and/or constructions of reality that don't *really* exist at all but, importantly, come to stand as if they are the real thing. Furthermore, in a business context, virtuality is perhaps not all that new either and certainly not 'born' with the development of the Internet. Being able to shop for goods remotely dates back to the advent of the mail order catalogue in the 1960s and more philosophically, we might make the claim that capitalism itself relies entirely on the harnessing of workers' 'intangible' labour power – skills and knowledge rather than physical exertion – which are often assumed to be solely attributes of the (post) modern 'knowledge worker' of the information age (Warner & Witzel, 2004). We cannot begin to do justice to these ideas fully here, but we wish to make it clear that in the sense that we refer to it in this article, virtuality should be understood as something that is *technology enabled* rather than the technology (in this case the Internet) itself.

The article is divided into four sections. In the first, we give a brief contextual overview of the issues in and drivers behind and delivery of 'e-learning' in order to establish the need for further investigation of these issues in line with the aims of this issue's special section. In the second section, we explain the methodological approach taken towards this study and outline our data generation methods. Section three presents, analyses and discusses emotional themes grounded in our data using theories drawn from the social and psychoanalytical study of emotions and the role and nature of virtuality. In the fourth and final section we put forward our hypothesis that the medium of virtuality has the potential to facilitate more emotionally engaging relationships between tutors and students, improvements in the teaching and learning environment and enrich tutor work experiences. We conclude the article by speculating as to the application of these findings in other occupational settings where virtual communication media are employed.

The virtual classroom

Driven by political initiatives to enhance participation in UK higher education through distance learning; to improve learning and teaching quality through technological advancements and underpinned by a need to find cost-effective ways to deliver courses to ever increasing numbers of students; 'e-learning' has well and truly taken hold in US and UK universities. In 2001, estimates suggested that there were over two million students learning online in the USA (O'Regan, 2003) and in the UK, the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales' 'e-learning' strategy document states its 10-year commitment to embedding e-learning into the curriculum and student experience of *all* UK higher education institutions (HEFCE, 2005).

The development of the course module from which the data for this article are drawn, was intertwined with these wider structural alterations and the commitments made by successive Conservative and Labour governments to increase student participation, with the current government's objective to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent of all those aged 18 to 30 by 2010. The growth of student numbers experienced throughout the 1990s and beyond has not been felt equally, with the majority of the increase in numbers being channelled into such institutions as our own: those created by the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992, and often referred to as 'new' universities. Given the need for institutions to attract not only the desired number of students, but those of greater educational attainment at age 18 or over, those tasked with curriculum responsibility at degree programme level have to attain a fine balance between ensuring academic rigour, student (and arguably employer) appeal. By 1999 it was clear that our own Business Studies and Business Administration degrees were in need of review. One of the outcomes of this process was the inclusion of a new optional module that analysed the growth and social impact of virtual technologies. Whilst it would include reference to e-business and e-commerce, its remit was to go beyond a focus on those phenomena and to develop a critical perspective as to the claims being made as to the revolutionary nature of developments instigated by the Internet and associated technologies.

We were tasked with this project and had to engage with thematic content issues as well as considerations as to how we would incorporate online teaching and learning tools. Both of us have extensive teaching experience but, at the time, neither had experience of online learning and teaching. Although skills deficiencies in using web-authoring techniques such as WebCT were overcome through attendance at various programmes offered by our own institution, we nonetheless did not appreciate what might occur should we move towards adopting online seminars, as this was a new

development for us and for our faculty. In addition to the theoretical complexity pertaining to the concept of virtuality as already noted, it is also important to observe that the terms 'e-learning', 'virtual education', 'virtuality' and 'online' are differentially employed and polyvalent expressions that can encompass anything from the use of computers (and the Internet) as mere electronic repositories for teaching materials such as copies of lecture notes, to fully interactive learning experiences where teacher and students are connected through Internet technologies in 'real time' using virtual tools including 'chat-rooms' and so on. It is this later manifestation of e-learning that we wish to concern ourselves with here and we will use the term 'online seminars' from now on to refer to these activities.

There are two basic ways to conduct online seminars – asynchronous (discussion boards) and synchronous (chat-rooms). The asynchronous method involves participants 'posting' electronic messages on a 'board' for others to read when next visiting the relevant website or page. Unless two or more people are simultaneously viewing the page, the communication is not experienced as being in 'real time' – in much the same way as when sending and receiving more conventional e-mail. Synchronous technologies, by contrast, *do* connect users at the same time, with each participant needing to be 'logged in' to the software to be able to exchange electronic messages with one another as if they were exchanging words in a face-to-face setting. This, of course, is still subject to some inevitable delays due to connectivity and typing speeds, for example. Whilst each method undoubtedly has its idiosyncrasies, we prefer to focus here on their commonalities; namely, that both modes of teaching and learning rely on a 'virtual presence' of students and teacher(s) and therefore it is the *virtuality* of this kind of teaching we especially wish to address, rather than tease out differences in 'real-time' versus 'off-line' communication. With the above in mind, the literature we review in this article is drawn from research into both modes of delivery. However, the data we discuss below are drawn from synchronous online seminars enabled using the 'chat' facility in WebCT (a commonly adopted e-learning platform in the UK). Using this technology, students and teacher are all 'present'; discussions take place in 'real time' via contributions which are typed into an on-screen dialogue box. These electronic 'conversations' are recorded verbatim by the software as a 'chat-room log'. Further details of these seminars are outlined more fully below.

Within the online teaching literature, there are now several good manuals for those delivering online seminars (see Salmon, 2000; Lockwood & Gooley, 2001; Stephenson, 2001) as well as an increasing numbers of studies focused on the practicalities and experiences of teaching and learning online. For instance, the now completed Joint Information Services

Committee (JISC) funded project 'Networked Learning in Higher Education' carried out at Lancaster University comprised a wide range of studies into student and teacher experiences of online learning (see http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/jisc/). Likewise, Kirkpatrick (2005) analyses his experiences of online seminars as a pedagogical tool and Coppola et al. (2002) dissect the process of becoming a 'virtual professor'. Other writers have explored more specific facets of e-learning, for example, the capacity of the medium to transcend geographical distance and to make participants invisible, so offering the potential for greater democratization of the learning process (Gur-Ze'ev, 2000; Papastephanou, 2005).

However, what intrigues us about these texts is the seeming elision of any acknowledgement of the emotional implications that online teaching, and particularly the teaching of online seminars, carry with it. Although O'Regan (2003) rightly focuses on the emotional context of learning for the student and problematizes the sharp demarcation of emotion from cognition in many models of education (she cites Bloom et al.'s (1956) pedagogically influential taxonomy of learning as an exemplar of this assumption) she does not apply this to the role of the teacher in these settings. Likewise, whilst Salmon (2000) touches upon the importance of 'empathy' in teaching online, it is only as a handy skill for the e-moderator in an instrumental capacity. Thus, for the nascent online tutor, one is left with the impression that facilitating such seminars is a somewhat sterile undertaking, as confirmed by Coppola et al.'s initial assumption that '. . . this computer-mediated communication channel . . . remains impoverished with respect to emotional expression' (2002: 178). Their findings, however, suggested that the teaching staff participating in the study *did* experience a greater emotional connection with their students when teaching online, concluding that: 'The affective role . . . required [online tutors] to find new tools to express emotion, yet they found the relationship with students more intimate' (Coppola et al., 2002: 186).

The omission of emotional dynamics from online learning and teaching discourse is even more surprising given that emotion has been and continues to be an enduring topic of debate in the wider literature concerned with virtuality. As Gurak (2004) states, emotion was a significant area of Internet research in the late 1980s to the mid-1990s; one that still has importance as technologies facilitate more sophisticated interaction between increasingly diverse sections of the world's population. We would suggest that a possible reason for this omission is due to the ways in which online teaching and learning is being presented as an essentially continuous experience to offline teaching for those engaged in using it. For example, our own introduction

to using WebCT by a highly competent and skilled tutor stressed the specific challenges facing the online tutor, but these were neither expressed nor experienced as being a fundamental emotional or any other alteration to familiar teaching experiences. So, the promotion of this medium is being presented to potential online tutors as being broadly continuous with their current teaching experiences (for example, set seminar times, the existence of tutor/student roles and their continuation, the location of the online interaction within an existing, usually familiar programme structure). WebCT also provides a form of continuation through the aegis of tutor control of the learning setting: the tutor designing the unit and its activities; the look and feel of the site, what materials are presented on it, how access to it is gained and what access students might have to the records of other seminar sessions. It could therefore be argued that the rules applying to the emotional performance of teaching might also continue without much alteration, even though an emerging body of research highlights the potential offered by general online interaction for greater emotional expressiveness. Emotion online is an enduring topic of debate in wider literature concerned with virtuality, especially that addressing virtual communities, identities, relationship and online chat. Williams (2001) gives a summary of the ways virtuality might impact on the realm of the affective in daily life; illustrating how the absence of the body in online interaction is either conceptualized as liberating for individuals interacting in this way or as something which impoverishes emotional life. A point echoed by Whitty (2002: 343) noting that there is an ongoing debate between those who view relationships enabled by the Internet as 'impersonal and hostile . . .' and those who consider the medium offers 'opportunities for the development of highly intimate interactions.'

We thread further conceptual analysis of emotion, virtuality and online teaching through the presentation of our data below. These data were generated through a combination of ethnography (participation by ourselves in the seminars) and grounded theory (analysing and coding transcripts of online seminar discussions). Since grounded theory explicitly involves 'generating theory and doing social research as two parts of the same process' (Glaser, 1978: 2), the aim of developing an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon means that it is often appropriate to consider existing literature alongside emergent data themes rather than discuss each in separate sections so that data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relation to each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The next section introduces the online teaching scenario from which our data are drawn in line with these principles.

Methodology, method and analysis

As briefly noted above, this article specifically examines online seminars that formed part of a 12-week final year undergraduate module, critiquing the nature of the 'virtual society' and its implications for business activity and institutional organization more generally. Part of the 2004/5 delivery of the module, each seminar lasted for 50 minutes, was held bi-weekly and was themed around a specific subject. Seminar discussion subjects were determined by the tutors and outlined in a scheme of work received by all students attending the unit. The students were not distance learners, but enrolled on undergraduate degree programmes that were otherwise traditionally delivered. The online seminars were therefore not used as a tool to enable participation across geographical distances but as part of an andragogic strategy to enable students to experience what it was like to interact purposefully using a virtual medium. Nonetheless, few of the students knew each other personally outside the online seminar setting because the module was an optional one offered on several different degree programmes across the Business School. We have captured, analysed and made sense of our experiences of the emotionality of teaching online in two ways. First, we reflected on our own participation in and the facilitation of 24 online seminars. We each facilitated two seminar groups for six weeks over a 12-week period and shared our responses to the development of these sessions by e-mail and via face-to-face conversation as well as summatively for purposes of unit review and for the purpose of writing this article. Second, we analysed and coded all of the 24 logs from these sessions – the automated transcripts of every message typed into the 'chat-room' software providing an account of all of the interactions occurring within the individual online seminar – to generate the grounded emotional themes discussed in this article. Because our e-mail exchanges were not saved, the nature of our conversations were fleeting and ephemeral, the logs provided the only extant dataset available to us. Given these circumstances, there was little alternative but to analyse all of the logs from all of the sessions – in sum, 24 printed transcripts of all the online interactions between tutor and students were read and each statement coded in the light of our remembered emotional reactions to the seminars at the time (see Appendix 1). These strategies might be broadly construed as 'ethnographic' and 'grounded theory' respectively as we note above. Indeed, we also observed that the two approaches merged together as the data analysis progressed as we explain further below.

In practice, the ethnographic component of the research consisted of each of us individually and collectively recalling and reflecting on our emotional experiences during and immediately after the seminar sessions in

a series of e-mail and face-to-face conversations concerning the progress of the module. Whilst it could be argued that the predominance of such studies in the fields of online learning and virtuality is problematic in terms of generating general theory, its use here is particularly justified via our later desire to develop a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of emotionality within the virtual classroom. Furthermore, we considered this strategy to be particularly appropriate because our object of study was the *experience* of teaching in an online setting and therefore we believed a full picture of our experiences of online learning would only be obtained by looking carefully at a 'real-life' instance from an immersive, subjective position. This was partly decided during attendance on a WebCT training course where neither of us felt we had gained any sense of what it might be 'really like' to teach online, despite learning the mechanics of running such a session, thus initially our focus was quite broad. However, the issue of emotionality emerged from the authors' discussions as one of the most striking and surprising elements of the teaching experience for both of us and this subsequently shaped the focus of our enquiry which may not have occurred if an alternative methodology had been adopted. Furthermore, as Willis (2000: 9) notes, an ethnographic approach requires what he describes as a sense of the 'poetry of experience' in that researchers often need to pay attention to data which are 'metaphorical, indirect and atmospheric [rather than] literal or rational . . .' (2000: 9). Given the 'emotional' iteration of the study we feel this made an ethnographic approach even more valuable.

However, we did not wish to merely describe our experiences, however richly. In addition, we intended to initiate a longer-range process of theory generation from the analysis of these experiences and as we have outlined above, grounded theory was considered appropriate for this task (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Eisenhardt, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To achieve this, student behaviour within the online seminar – as indicated by their 'verbal/written' contributions recorded in the logs – was independently and separately coded using open and axial coding processes (see Appendix 1). What we were specifically interested in locating and eventually analysing were our emotional responses to the experience of teaching online, experiences that had generated an unexpected level of emotionality. As we had discussed via our interactions during the unit, there was something about the altered interactions with students online that was reformulating our emotional experiences of 'being a teacher'. This had come to the fore during the ethnographic reflection described above and guided the subsequent coding of the logs as we sought to identify how this process was occurring during the seminars.

These aspects of the analysis are initially concerned with naming and categorizing phenomena through a close examination of the data and are

compared for similarities and differences with questions being asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data gathered. For example, the conversation outlined below was explored via our open coding memos on 'anxiety', 'being open', 'the classroom', 'embarrassment' and 'facing people':

> JACK ≫ being at a computer means you feel less anxiety so more open to discuss than a seminar classroom
>
> LOUISE ≫ definitely Jack
>
> FATIMA ≫ but chat with PC is questionable . . .
>
> Sam (tutor) ≫ What do you think contributes to that anxiety in class?
>
> LOUISE ≫ I don't think people would open up so much in a class room
>
> JACK ≫ worrying about what others are thinking?
>
> SHANE ≫ if u say something embarrassing here you can get up and walk away whereas in a class room you have 2 face people

Through joint discussion and review, particular emotional phenomena could be grouped and given a conceptual name. These individual formulations were then jointly developed into a smaller group of students' behavioural categories. Once these were identified, we discussed our emotional reactions to them and further classified these into the themes we present and theorize below (see also Appendix 1). This account makes it appear as if these two methodological strands were separate from one another. However, during the analysis of our own and each other's logs there was a strong sense of 're-experiencing' our emotions and as such the logs were not 'sterile' records of past interaction to be picked apart and recombined as codes, but more akin to 'material memories' (Kwint, 1999) that evoked recollections and emotional remembrances of our feelings in the seminars. Hence, we were involved in a process of fracturing the data through open coding and the identification of categories, and the reconfiguration of categories via the making of connections between a category and its subcategories when engaging in axial coding. What was also striking here was the degree of similarity in terms of our independent analyses of the interaction with students and the emotional responses to this even when we were analysing each other's seminars. However, as stated in the introduction, the close

pre-existing and continuing relationship between the authors as well as previous experiences of research collaboration might explain this. It also required us to heighten our critical relationship with the data and the emerging storyline, to write a hypothetical statement regarding the relationships amongst the categories and to return to the logs to see whether these statements held true.

Through this process of joint review, the development of fewer, denser categories and the exploration of their connections via the process of axial coding, the conceptualization of a descriptive story about the central phenomena of the study emerged. It also facilitated the development of theoretical saturation whereby the categories are themselves reduced further within the boundaries of the emerging theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Overall, this approach offers an additional dimension in that grounded theories are open to modification. Given that the aim of grounded theory is to produce a fit between data and theory, then a logical conclusion of such an approach would be to ensure modifiability. Thus, whilst this article focuses only on a singular case, a grounded theory approach would facilitate possible modification should further development of these findings occur by virtue of analysing additional cohorts and moderator responses to their teaching experiences. We return to this possibility in our conclusions.

Emotional responses to teaching online

Whilst the focus of this article lies in our emotional responses to online teaching, the generation of these feeling states did not simply occur in isolation from those we taught, or from our emotional engagement with each other. The following section will explore the emotionality of online teaching experienced in the seminars as co-responses to this interactive process. For these reasons we have referred extensively to the 'verbal behaviours' exhibited by students during the online seminars as opposed to their explicitly emotional content. Since we cannot know what the students were feeling we can only work from how we felt about (what we saw as) their changed behaviours. In places it may seem that we are blurring the boundaries between their actions and our responses, but given that we are drawing on both psychoanalytical and social constructivist accounts of emotion, we believe that this is inevitable: the response and the stimulus combine to generate and maintain the emotional exchange as experienced by us. In addition, although somewhat beyond the scope of this particular dataset, the feedback forms completed by students at the end of the unit overwhelmingly express emotional sentiments about participating in the online seminars.

Students used words including 'less fear', 'no embarrassment', 'fun', 'exciting', 'feel less stupid', 'confidence', etc. which all support our interpretations. To return to the data this article draws from then, this emotionality falls into the inter-connected emotional categories of 'intimacy', 'play' and the 'pride/shame' dynamic and each is dealt with in turn.

1) Intimacy

In this section, we adopt a broadly social constructivist perspective, conceptualizing the emotions generated through participation in the higher education seminar as cultural phenomena whose meaning and communication as well as their generation occurs via culture and social context (Gabriel, 1998). Participation in a seminar calls for appropriate emotional performances from those who engage in it, with these expectations applying to both teachers and to learners. Authors such as Fineman (1993, 1995, 1997) have studied the rules that govern emotional performances, examining how emotion flows – by being symbolically constructed, communicated and disseminated – from each individual to his or her audience and back again. As with many other organizational arenas, in a classroom setting we would expect to see displays of emotion based on a range of cultural norms, about what teachers and students do, how it is appropriate to behave and, importantly for our purposes here, how one is supposed to *feel* in such a situation depending on myriad factors including one's role, status, culture, background and indeed, position in the room.

Moving from traditional face-to-face settings to a virtual learning environment inevitably involves changes in communication patterns – notably a shift from verbal to written 'speech', attendant absence of paralinguistic cues and removal of the traditional socio-spatial indicators that tell us how to behave and feel in the classroom, such as the usual seating/furniture arrangements which subliminally denote status differentials between learners and teacher as well as hinder or encourage contribution to class discussions and relationships between students and their willingness to interact in class. Consequently, we might expect this diminution of non-verbal communications to be problematic for online teaching (Coppola et al., 2002) or, at the very least, that new ways of expressing emotion online are needed given that these physical and spatial indicators have been removed along with the familiar ways in which emotion is constructed and read through them. For some, this contributes to antagonistic behaviours seen online as a result of communicative 'de-individuation', for example, so-called 'flaming' – 'the action or practice of sending inflammatory, abusive . . . messages by e-mail or as a posting to a newsgroup . . . (frequently) in an impulsively angry response

to a previous message or a perceived breach of Internet etiquette' (OED, 1989). In other words, because non-verbal and bodily cues are missing, intentions become misinterpreted through the structure of messages or the words used in online conversation (see Lee, 2005 for an overview) and so from this perspective, virtuality seems to encourage negative emotional encounters.

However, other writers argue that it is precisely the absence of socio-bodily cues that makes the Internet a more intimate area for communication. Parks and Floyd (1996), Weisband and Kiesler (1996) and McKenna and Bargh (1998), all comment on the readiness of participants in online chat to 'self-disclose' emotional confidences and otherwise private and intensely personal details about themselves. Whitty (2003) and Whitty and Carr (2003) nuance this claim by suggesting that instead of considering the body *absent* in virtual communication, we should look instead at the ways in which the body is *reconfigured* online in order to understand how complex emotional processes such as flirting and lying are enacted. This resonates with Argyle and Shields's (1996) claim that bodies do not disappear in cyber-space, but that the technology mediates the body, making its expressive qualities apparent in different ways.

In our online seminars, the reconfiguration of bodily cues, affective mechanisms and hierarchical prompts – whilst they could have been experienced as unnerving or even threatening – *did* seem to encourage a more intimate teaching and learning environment for us as tutors. However, it is important to note at this juncture, that hierarchy between tutor and students was *reduced* not replaced or entirely removed despite all participants in the virtual seminar being simply and democratically identified by name. However, whilst acknowledging commentators such as Gur-Ze'ev (2000) who believe that the Internet and online pedagogic forms have powerful egalitarian implications for education, we would assert that from our experience, it is too early to state that virtuality offers the ability to dismantle constraints of class, gender, nationality and race though a radicalization of interaction in uncensored and anarchic communication. Reduction in hierarchy did not result in a removal of the authority of the tutor, or our role in determining overall discussion themes.

Specifically, our feelings of intimacy consisted of a sense of warming to, or closeness with the students triggered by what seemed to be a greater willingness on their part to contribute to critical discussion, share their experiences and engage in playful banter. Examples of these behaviours, such as the exchange below, were coded and grouped together under the axial code of 'rapport building' as detailed in Appendix 1. Importantly, our experiences suggest that a greater degree of self-disclosure occurred in these online seminars than when they were classroom based (Wallace, 1999; Joinson,

2001) on the part of both student and tutor, leading to a closer relationship between both parties. This is illustrated by the following examples drawn from seminars themed around online shopping:

> Sarah (tutor) ≫ I had an interesting experience with some Jimmy Choo shoes last week . . . nearly handed over a mortgage payment!
>
> Sarah (tutor) ≫ Just couldn't imagine buying those online!
>
> DAVID ≫ lol, it is a bit more wary buying expensive items
>
> LIK ≫ haha . . . . mortgage for a shoe
>
> Sarah ≫ But such shoes!
>
> . . ..
>
> SHANE ≫ i'm lookin at stuff now as its my gals b'day next month and i've found something u never see in a shop yet its tacky but somehow cool
>
> EMMA ≫ that sounds well dodgy shane!
>
> Sam (tutor) ≫ What is it Shane, come on spill the beans! Is it a pole dancing kit by any chance????
>
> SHANE ≫ nope
>
> Sam (tutor) ≫ Ha ha. Only my mates bought me one for my b'day. Much fun . . .
>
> EMMA ≫ ok, sam!!!!
>
> DAVID ≫ oh thats good
>
> THEIN ≫ hahaha

Although the psychological explanations for the amount and pattern of self-disclosure in online settings are generally unclear from our data and there was no evidence of self-disclosure initiating *very* personal, intense or risky responses, we *did* experience a heightened sense of being part of the seminar

students' world. We gained an insight into their unfolding online personalities and acquired a greater feel for the issues and problems they faced – issues that, whilst important, might not always get aired in the classroom due to the possibility of embarrassment and loss of face that could be generated by stepping outside the deference–emotion dynamic at play there. In this sense, self-disclosure engendered a degree of intimacy with the students in the seminar groups that was and is often lacking (for us at least) in traditional seminars.

It is important to note here that the students *themselves* identified this 'lack of embarrassment' as a function of the virtual medium and so in line with the grounded nature of this study, we tentatively suggest that an online seminar may represent an emotional discontinuity with its traditional counterpart. Online teaching and learning is novel and largely uncharted territory for both tutors and learners, at least in our case as we note above. The feeling rules that govern face-to-face teaching interaction appear to be disrupted by unfamiliarity with the virtual medium and then reconfigured, facilitated by the absence of the body and the removal of spatial clues to denote status.

But where do these renegotiated affective roles and rules originate? One possible answer is that for many students, and for us too, the cultural norms established in 'non-scholastic' communicative online environments (such as e-mail or social chat-rooms) permit a more extensive display of emotion than we might expect in a physical classroom setting. In other words, whilst online seminars were acknowledged by our students as being located within an institutional environment, and therefore implicitly imbued with certain behavioural expectations, we would argue that the broader cultural influences brought into the online seminar environment through previous and often extensive experience of being online in different milieux influenced our emotional displays and those of our students. But, to assert a cautionary caveat, it is useful to question how far these altered dynamics truly represent alterations in power relations between tutor and students. Does the reduction in hierarchy create room for *new* forms of power? To what extent does it operate as an extension of existing operations of power, seeing the greater intrusion of the already powerful tutor into the world of the less powerful student?

Whilst the above rests on a social-constructivist reading of emotion and its location within social situations, following Gabriel (1998) we also acknowledge the shortcomings of such an approach. As he states, constructivist approaches are limited as to what they offer in terms of our understanding as to the *origins* of emotions, their transformation through communication and sharing, or the ways they are modified in the course of daily experience. Citing Fineman (1993), he asserts that this approach has 'a

total blind spot when it comes to identifying where emotions come from and how they fit into the biographies of organizations and individuals' (Gabriel, 1998: 295). This is where, as Gabriel states, psychoanalysis can enhance understanding, allowing us to construct a nuanced proposition as to why we experienced heightened intimacy online. Whilst social constructivist explanations could be used here, and it is not our intention to rebut them entirely, we would argue that the centrality of emotion with reference to human motivation is particularly evidenced where the category of play is concerned as discussed below within a psychoanalytical framework.

Play

Online interaction seems to break restraints experienced within the classroom as we have seen, but it also requires an accentuation of the moderator role; shifting away from more traditional concerns with facilitating student acquisition of knowledge and toward greater visibility of reciprocal learning processes instead. Here we consider how intimacy of connection was not simply to do with self-disclosure – be it theirs or ours – but also an intimacy generated by spontaneous play with and absorption in online discussion: the sharing of ideas, questions and thoughts; expressions of uncertainty; requests for elaboration and explanation as well as strong disagreement and the assertion of a counter view. The direct use of language within online seminars led to points made being clear and to the point – and even if the point being made *was* sometimes unclear, the medium allowed us to chart individuals' cognitive struggle to express and develop ideas. In an era dominated by clearly defined learning outcomes and the corresponding view of learning as being a linear, progressive process (Lees, 1992) the online seminars allowed us to see the messiness of learning – our own and that of the students as well as the open-ended character of this process, its fragmented nature as well as the 'eureka moments'. Therefore, one of the most salient outcomes of this experience was the recognition of the tutor's affective role – a crucial aspect of which is the creation and maintenance of a potential space referred to below.

For students, the ability to engage in this – what we might refer to as socio-linguistic 'creative play' – was generated by the removal of the body and attendant social cues – *by the virtuality of the medium itself* – and by the reduction in embarrassment reported by the students when engaging online. As detailed in Appendix 1, expressions relating to embarrassment and participation were axially coded to indicate the occurrence of 'play', since this seemed to be a strong factor facilitating students' perceived freedom to be playful. When we commented on the degree of interaction and seeming

absorption witnessed in the seminars and mused as to whether this would have occurred in a traditional classroom, the student response was that the degree of self-disclosure and participation would not be replicated in a face-to-face environment, as the following transcript indicates:

> EMMA ≫ I was really worried before I came online that i wouldn't know what to do
>
> JACK ≫ being at a computer means you feel less anxiety so more open to discuss than a seminar classroom
>
> LOUISE ≫ definitely Jack
>
> FATIMA ≫ but chat with PC is questionable . . .
>
> Sam (tutor) ≫ What do you think contributes to that anxiety in class?
>
> LOUISE ≫ I don't think people would open up so much in a class room
>
> JACK ≫ worrying about what others are thinking?
>
> SHANE ≫ if u say something embarrassing here you can get up and walk away whereas in a class room you have 2 face people

This has interesting andragogic implications because it leads us to speculate that the ability to engage in more complex thought, to play with ideas more creatively and to apply the tentative outcomes of such to a given area of discussion has the potential to occur more frequently where bodily cues and attendant embarrassment are removed.

For both of us there was a highly playful dimension to our feelings of intimacy, what Winnicott described as 'the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable' (Winnicott, 1971: 47). A psychoanalytic approach to play conceptualizes our emotional responses and the seminar environment very closely and illustrates how an online environment can operate as a form of transitional space; one that offers opportunities for creative exploration through play. As Winnicott (1971) noted, this activity is central to personal development and mental health, not only in the early stages of infancy but during the entirety of life. Thus, should we follow such an approach, it is possible to understand the importance such spaces can attain within institutional

environments in terms of offering opportunities for creative exploration, should there be the provision of a suitable 'holding environment', or in other words, the provision of a bounded and relatively familiar (safe) environment within which to play.

Our experiences of online seminars dovetail with Modell's (1990) description of play where he notes that it occurs in a certain space with certain limitations as to duration of time, but it might also have its own quality of timelessness – as seen in student responses when seminars were in the closing stages:

> Sam (tutor) ≫ Believe it or not guys we have come to the end of the session . . .!!
>
> LOUISE ≫ that went so quickly
>
> MATTHEW ≫ ahh, nooooo, I was just getting into it
>
> WENDY ≫ time flies when yr having fun

Playing is also separated from ordinary life by 'the rules of the game' such as those operating within a scholastic environment with most creative play having rules that relate to the temporary world in which play is occurring. Rules are therefore a means of containing a space in which ideas, illusions and such elements of play can flourish (Modell, 1990). Most importantly here, as identified by Winnicott, play occurs in a potential space, a transitional area, that is located between inner and outer worlds between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived. It is a space for the imagination, a 'space between' where there is room for the play of speculation, where we can experiment and be challenged but must also be a place of rest 'for the human individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated' (1971: 2). In this way, the process goes on as we are never free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, but relief can be found in that intermediate area of experience where we play. In this sense, play is not something that we experience only or predominately as children but is something that we retain through life (Winnicott, 1971).

Whilst we would concur with Whitty and Carr's (2003) analysis of Turkle's (1995) idea that the computer can be experienced as an object on the border between self and not-self, we would also assert that we seemingly created a holding environment which both involved the operation of familiar pedagogic and emotional 'rules of the game' but was also allied to a form of 'holding' online so that playing within a possibly unfamiliar and threatening

environment did not foster unbearable anxiety. One significant type of such play was the use of teasing and banter; a significant behaviour exhibited by both us and by students (see Appendix 1 for specific open codes relating to 'banter').

Bantering behaviour consisted of jokes, insults aimed at known and named peers, for example, 'Adam, you gimp', a sharing of states of mind and was variously used as a means of establishing connections with others, to catch up, to fill space and to break focus during seminars. Whilst it could be argued that the digressive behaviours exhibited in bantering are frequently irritating because they have the ability to divert attention from discussion, closer examination of this phenomenon suggests that it operates in a complex way with diversions instigated by banter sometimes leading to new discussion threads (Ugoretz, 2005). We also engaged in banter and this was expressed as a form of self-deprecation, as a means of responding to banter directly aimed at us as in the example below. Its use could also be seen as evidence of a willingness to relinquish a degree of tutor authority and thus provides an illustration of how the reduction in hierarchy operated from the very first seminars:

TIM ≫ morning sarah!

JOHN ≫ better late than never! lol

ANDREW ≫ snowed in were we? or just lazy

SARAH ≫ can u see her??

Sarah (tutor) ≫ hi, has anyone else had the same problems getting onto the effing system?

DAVID ≫ no

WENDY ≫ no

Sarah (tutor) ≫ Just so's you know, I was here ages ago!!

SARAH ≫ ha ha

JOHN ≫ yea good try

Sarah (tutor) ≫ Truly. Truly

ANDREW ≫ honestly . . . the dog ate my homework . . . likely story

Banter was also closely associated with the aforementioned student self-disclosure. In one example, banter about love being blind led to a discussion about working life post-university – which was looming large – and the comfort offered by virtual escape. Whilst both of us had been regularly exposed to student anxieties here, the intensity and scope of their fears combined with an envisioning of their working futures were more intensely expressed within this online medium than we had experienced in a 'real' teaching and pastoral environment. This relates to our feelings of intimacy with the students but also to the emotions of shame – discussed in the next section – at not being more mindful of student anxieties.

To conclude this section, however, we would concur with Herring (1999) that computer-mediated, written, multi-party conversation has some unique interactional advantages in that it enhances possibilities for language play and playful interaction that are often important to the learning process but are often ignored or denigrated within the online and offline andragogic literature. In this way, intimacy of connection was not simply to do with self-disclosure – be it theirs or ours – but an intimacy generated by the playful sharing of ideas, questions and thoughts.

Pride and shame

One of our most enduring emotional responses to the experiences of online seminars can best be expressed as a paradoxical interchange between our pride and pleasure in the quality and quantity of the students' contributions juxtaposed with feelings of shame and guilt at our prior assessment of their abilities. We are conceptualizing shame as involving the annulment or abrogation of an emotional, behavioural or moral convention; codes that are important to the formation and maintenance of social bonds that are central to our ability to be in attunement with others. Dissolution of these rules and codes will therefore see the individual lying outside the mutual identification and understanding that, according to Goffman (1967), is central to the ways in which we signal social worth and evaluation – a signalled evaluation of even the most minor things – such as student behaviour in a teaching and learning environment.

To a large extent (in our teaching experiences at least and as mentioned in several online seminars), students' capabilities are often obscured by their reluctance to contribute to class discussions on account of the emotional dynamics of potential embarrassment as alluded to above. Over time we argue that these 'seminar silences' have had the compound effect of lowering our perceptions of student ability, calling into question student motivation to learn. In the online seminars the level of participation and continuing engagement in critical discussion therefore surprised us,

particularly given the aforementioned restrictions imposed by WebCT and the continuation of tutor control. This expressiveness, in particular, contributed to our feelings of shame in recognizing a tendency to underestimate our students, failing to give them the credit they deserved and assuming they were unwilling or unable to engage in challenging debate. We are not claiming here, of course, that virtuality in and of itself improved student performance. But we *do* tentatively claim that virtuality gave us increased *evidence* of student ability as a result of more visible participation. Examples of this 'visibility' are given in the open codes listed in Appendix 1 that relate to the formation of pride/shame as a theoretical code. However, providing empirical evidence of our emotional reaction is somewhat problematic because it was not shared with the students, but was the subject of continuing private discussion between the tutors – the nature of the emotional dynamic being such that open sharing of it would have been problematic. It would, therefore, be a highly interesting one to share with future student cohorts and to examine this further within online and offline andragogic settings.

As we have already established, our data suggest that expressive qualities of the students' minds were stimulated through the erosion of the body because it removed the embarrassment they reported they frequently felt when interacting in a traditional seminar setting. This has resonance with Scheff's (1990, 1997, 2000) innovative account of emotional life where pride and shame are central to the process of sustaining self-identity. It is also an account which is explicitly located within the body and the interpretation of bodily cues experienced in our interaction and involves 'the monitoring of one's own actions by viewing one's self from the standpoint of others' (Scheff, 1990: 80); thus reaffirming the emotional interdependency of persons. Citing Goffman (1959, 1967), Scheff makes some important connections to the ways in which perception of the self by others, in relation to the bonds of day-to-day life, is the main focus of feelings of pride and shame. As previously mentioned, the risk of experiencing this emotion, as Goffman points out, is contained in every social encounter and would necessarily include the experience of teaching and learning. Of course, none of this means that face-to-face teaching encounters will inevitably result in embarrassing situations but, as stated, for many of our students, online seminars and their removal of face-to-face interaction did lead to a reduction of embarrassment experienced when articulating their views. However, the heightened expressiveness and spontaneity demonstrated by enhanced student participation not only elicited a responsive gesture from us, but also instigated the experience of our *private* unrecorded pride/shame dynamic.

But we would also assert that the enhanced spontaneity and participation witnessed here was also facilitated by the reduction of the

teacher/learner hierarchy through the removal of the teaching rules implied in the spatial dimensions of the traditional classroom. Thus, following Scheff and Goffman, the reduction of hierarchy experienced via the medium of virtuality intersects with an alteration in the rules of engagement in the teacher/learner relationship. It also intersects with the absence of bodily cues which also seemingly facilitates an increased emotional expressiveness. To be an instigator or participant in the institutional and other processes which provoke such emotional states was, and continues to be experienced by us as profoundly shameful.

Whilst we also experienced shame due to our failure to evaluate our students' abilities sufficiently highly, it was possible to discharge it through mutually shared expressions of contrition and acts of reparation such as greater willingness to assist with assignment queries – often in order to heighten interest and performance. Public displays of the unit were also carefully expressed – possibly due to an unconscious awareness that immodesty would result in any deference shown towards us for our achievements being withdrawn, and thus inducing shame (Goffman, 1967). Thus, whilst positive student feedback and colleague interest in our work elicited pleasure and pride, our failure to perceive students' potential also caused shame. Although we were later able to share this with other colleagues, at the time these feelings of shame were only shared with each other. However, as noted by Lynd (1958), sharing one's shame with another can strengthen the relationship: 'The very fact that shame is an isolating experience also means that if one can find ways of sharing and communicating it, this communication can bring about particular closeness with other persons' (1958: 66). In this way it was possible to avoid what Lewis (1971) termed the shame/anger loop or where the operation of shame leads to silence and withdrawal.

Indeed, student assertions as to the freedom from embarrassment offered by online seminars indicate its existence within a UK academic setting (or at least our institution). The following excerpts from the online seminar logs further illustrate this:

> CRAIG ≫ it removes shyness (if that is a word), fear of saying something wrong
>
> TERENCE ≫ i tend to say what i think more, express more opinions
>
> LUCIE ≫ you put yr perspective across and not feel shy that people are laughing or judging you
>
> Sam (tutor) ≫ do you still feel embarrassed though?
>
> TOM ≫ yeah but noone can see you so it doesnt matter

CRAIG ≫ agree

LUCIE ≫ noone can see red cheeks :o)

Conclusions

Arguably, this form of interaction may break restraints experienced within the classroom, facilitating not only spontaneous play with and absorption in online discussion, but greater emotional expressiveness by all parties. In an era of mass higher education and our experiences of teaching substantial numbers of students each semester in traditional seminars, where one's ability to gain any insight as to the personalities of those taught is variable at best, this marked a distinctly different experience. It also required us to alter our role and shift away from more traditional concerns with generating student knowledge and towards a more developmental one which facilitated thinking and experimentation. The creation of such an environment has clear pedagogic implications that are worthy of fuller exploration as O'Regan (2003) rightly stresses. Although not our primary purpose in this article, we nonetheless feel that a brief summary of these in relation to our study is a useful digression here in order to reinforce why attention to the emotionality of online teaching is important and further underline the transformational nature of virtuality with regard to emotion at work more generally. If that which we have argued above is at all indicative of other tutors' emotional experiences of teaching virtually, we would argue that the intimacy and reduced hierarchy fostered by virtuality has the potential to engage students and tutors in more creative, complex and/or critical thinking than would otherwise be evident in a classroom setting.

More specifically, the characteristics of the virtual medium seemed to result in students feeling more comfortable in 'speaking out' in the online seminar. We would argue on the basis of our data that this was due to the reduction in experiences of embarrassment associated with doing so in a face-to-face environment, particularly for less sociable/outgoing students and therefore, we tentatively suggest this might mean online seminars are more productive arenas for learning which involves the airing of potentially controversial thoughts which, in a traditional classroom or other organizational arena could instigate this emotion. This moves beyond the scope of this particular article as we have already noted, but nonetheless would be a fruitful area for future investigation.

Overall, our emotional experiences bear close resemblances to those of Coppola et al.'s (2002) correspondents who noted a shift online in the cognitive role played by the tutor. For us, this was played out through intimacy,

feelings of playfulness and the dynamic of pride and shame we experienced as a result of the (re)cognition of student ability and connection to their 'worlds' that was precipitated by the online seminars. Thus, our tentative theory, grounded in the data presented here, suggests that the medium of virtuality forces a renegotiation of the feeling rules that generate and maintain emotion in an organized environment (in this case teaching) via the absence of physicality and socio-spatial indicators. In other words, removal of traditional emotional cues – such as embarrassment exhibited on and through bodies – and prompts based on spatial proximity – such as hierarchical relationships – facilitated ways of relating to one another in the online environment that heightened the emotional dimension for us as teachers. Importantly, this increased statement of emotionality was a very rewarding aspect of the course, re-humanizing our jobs in an increasingly rationalized educational context. Interestingly, these feelings have also spilled over into our interactions with students more broadly. As such we might also make the speculative claim that virtuality (at least in this context) can transform emotional relationships beyond the confines of the medium itself.

To sum up, we have shown how one example of virtuality at work – teaching using online seminars – does appear to change the emotional context that this work is performed within. Importantly for our purposes here, these changes appear to be substantially due to the unique characteristics of virtuality as a medium of communicative exchange. Although not our overriding aim here, we have nonetheless suggested that these shifts, in the present context, also have pedagogic implications for students but more importantly we hope to have shown how they can impact on the professional experience of teaching, including relationships with students, relationships between teachers as well as the intrinsic satisfaction of the job itself.

To this end, we conclude by calling for further research into the emotional impact of e-learning for the online tutor in order to address the current gap in andragogical literature addressing these issues. If, as predicted, the e-learning revolution is a reality for those engaged in higher (and other forms of) education then a recognition of the emotionality of teaching in these ways will be crucial in developing effective, more informed and successful online teachers. For example, we both engaged in traditional forms of assessment of student performance that maintain tutor/student hierarchy, and as noted previously, whilst engaging in banter does not *necessarily* indicate a change in power relations – indeed this would be a fruitful area for further research – the online medium *could* be experienced as an extension of the already powerful tutor into the world of the less powerful student. Had we not been willing to re-evaluate and renegotiate our role and relationship with the students in the online seminars – asserting control over bantering, or refusing to engage in banter with students ourselves – we suspect the seminars

would have been less productive and less stimulating for all involved. More broadly, in using teaching as an example of virtuality at work we also suggest that our findings might map onto a broader terrain of emotionality in virtual work and workplaces given that the hierarchical and rule-bound character of an educational environment has resonance with the structure and formal make-up of other organizational milieux.

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Appendix 1 Open codes were initial labels attached to each statement in the seminar logs to stand for our interpretations of them. Axial codes were the combinations of 'like' codes together. Finally, we re-analysed these datasets in the light or *our* emotional reactions to them identified during the ethnographic component of the research (as helpfully suggested by two anonymous reviewers) resulting in the two 'theoretical codes' and the final 'core category'.

Open codes	*Axial codes*	*Theoretical codes*	*Core category*
Challenge authority Cheeky – to us Cheeky – by us Shared experiences	**Reduction in hierarchy** *All instances where students challenged tutors' statements or responded directly to one another were included under this code*	**Rapport building**	
Humour Cheeky – them Teasing Emoticons Fun (seminar) Digression	**Banter** *Teasing, joking, making sarcastic statements and cheeky remarks by all participants were categorized as 'banter'*		
		Play	
Overseas students Community Joining-in Embarrassment The classroom Facing people	**Participation** *Extent of seminar membership's willingness to contribute and expressions directly stating that students felt more comfortable doing so*		**Intimacy**
Reflection Confession Being open Uncertainty Honesty	**Thinking** *Thoughtful, complex and/or particularly critical and well-made points and the exchanges these remarks encouraged*		
Critical thinking Innovation Anxiety	**Direct expression** *Instances where students 'spoke their mind' expressing contradictory, strong and/or personal/private opinions*	**Pride/Shame**	

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