

# ‘You're facing that machine but there's a human being behind it’: students’ affective experiences on an online doctoral programme

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## **Introduction**

While the image of online learning as a disembodied and disengaged experience may persist (Cunningham 2014), research on the strength and variability of learners’ emotions online indicates this is far from the case in practice (Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, and Killion 2012). This paper will argue that it is important to understand the embodied experience of online learning to help learners make the most of the online environment. The paper will draw on Wetherell’s (2012) exploration of affective practice to theorise online learners’ responses to the pedagogical and technological environment of online learning. Highlighting learners’ embodied and unfinished affective practice online may enhance our capacity both to design environments that reveal the body and to develop teaching techniques to respond more productively to learners’ feelings. To show the relevance of conceptualising learners’ feeling in terms of affective practice, therefore, the paper will discuss existing research that illuminates the embodied character of online learning, the way that the online environment produces and shapes learners’ emotions, and the complexity and instability of those emotions. Findings from case study research with two cohorts of online doctoral students will then be presented, including the results of survey and indepth interviews. A combination of thematic and narrative analysis of the survey

and interview data will be used to reveal the unfinished character of students' feelings online. The subsequent discussion will explore the implications of thinking in terms of learners' affective practice online for developing effective online pedagogy.

### *What happens to the body in online learning?*

Research focused on what it feels like to learn online has taken account of changes to identity, performativity and embodiment (Bayne, 2010; Savin-baden & Sinclair, 2011; Savin-Baden, 2010). Embodiment online is performed differently from face to face environments. In textually oriented environments like online forums and email, Kazan (2007, 253) argued that we 'communicate as *typed* bodies'. For Kazan, (2007, 261) 'word choice, syntax, sentences and paragraphs' deliver the '*other* physicality of writing': the body and its history remains written into users' linguistic conventions. Such reflections indicate that the specificity of embodiment and identity may be, therefore, important in understanding the experience of online learning. Savin-Baden (2010) has suggested that online environments often produce a sense of vulnerability (Bayne, 2006) and uncertainty. For example, Bayne (2010, 6) argued that:

in working online as teachers and learners, we are working in 'destabilized' classrooms, engaging in spaces and practices which are disquieting, disorienting, strange, anxiety-inducing, uncanny.

The way we feel online is an important part of the learning experience, therefore, and this has led to an increasing volume of research on the emotions of online learners (for example, Artino & Jones 2012; Butz, Stupnisky, & Pekrun 2015; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell 2012; Marchand & Gutierrez 2012a; McIntosh 2010; Regan et al. 2012; Robinson 2013; Tempelaar, Niculescu, Rienties, Gijsselaers, & Giesbers 2012;

Wosnitza & Volet 2005; You & Kang 2014; Zembylas, Theodorou, & Pavlakis 2008; Zembylas 2008). Within this literature, however, it is acknowledged that the emotions experienced by online learners are not simple to understand, since the same experience can evoke ‘completely different, even opposite, emotions for learners’ (Rienties & Rivers 2014, 6). The next section will, therefore, explore some of the emotional complexity of the experience of online learning.

### **Embodiment and emotion in online learning**

Gilmore & Warren suggested that, in contrast with accounts of the body disappearing in online communication, technology mediates the body in different ways. The absence of bodily cues has the potential to impact the emotionality of online communication both positively and negatively. It can encourage anger or ‘flaming’ because intentions are misunderstood, but it can also create more intimacy precisely because online participants are more likely to ‘self-disclose’ personal details. Understood in this way, the body is reconfigured online, which produces altered emotional states. While Gilmore & Warren’s focus was their own emotional response to teaching online, they also pointed to the emotional experiences of their students who, for example, used highly emotional words in their course evaluations. Similarly, Reilly et al. (2012) reported their students’ use of rich emotional language as indicating the emotional processes that they undergo in learning online. Reilly et al. (2012, 101) highlighted the range of emotions experienced by online students within existing research reports: ‘they showed shame and embarrassment as well as enthusiasm and excitement with the new way of learning’. Students felt anger at discomfort in learning situations, frustration with technology, anxiety and apprehension in not keeping up with the course and the public and permanent nature

of communication. This was corroborated with research by Butz, Stupnisky, & Pekrun (2015, 8) who found that, when compared with on-campus learners, online students reported higher levels of ‘technology-related anger, anxiety and helplessness’. Reilly et al.’s (2012) own research identified themes of aloneness, anonymity, nonverbal communication, trepidations and unknowns recurring in students’ accounts of the emotional factors of online learning. The authors reported displeasure amongst students feeling ‘‘out of the loop’ and isolated in their first online courses’ Reilly et al. (2012, 102). Students described multiple ‘unknowns’ such as ‘course specifics, instructors, and classmates in the virtual classroom as well as confusing course calendars, unclear syllabi, and types of assignments’ (103), and suggested that these were exacerbated by a lack of feedback.

The relationship between emotion and learning is not a simple matter, however. Many studies have argued that cognition and emotion are interlinked (Lehman, D’Mello, and Graesser 2012), leading educational psychologists to identify a group of academic emotions associated with students’ capacity for self-regulated learning (Pekrun et al. 2002). However, reflecting on their study of a self-paced online course, Artino & Jones (2012) suggested that the relationship between an emotional state and learning was not straightforward, particularly in the case of frustration. Taken alone, ‘frustration negatively correlated with elaboration and metacognition’ but other factors, such as how much the task was valued, could act as suppressors, so that ‘emotions labelled as “negative” can potentially produce “positive” outcomes’ (Artino & Jones 2012, 173).

Moreover, Lehman et al. (2012) considered the impact of various learning environments on emotions such as expert human tutoring sessions, Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS), and computer games, and found that confusion was

significant in predicting learning with an ITS. In such contexts, confusion was the ‘most frequently occurring emotion when compared to both “basic” emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, disgust) ... and other learning-centered emotions’ (Lehman et al. 2012, 185). States that trigger confusion (impasses) were thought to have important learning benefits, since the successful resolution of the impasse has been associated with learning. As a result, it is important to make a distinction between learners able to regulate their confusion, and those who become ‘hopelessly confused’ (Lehman et al. 2012, 189). However, learners may consider being in a state of confusion negatively, and seek to avoid it. The authors suggested that it may be possible to reframe this experience as a positive one, in order to ‘help learners engage in the process of impasse resolution’ (Lehman et al. 2012, 192).

Such studies tend to adopt a psychological perspective considering emotion the private component of an individual’s personality structure. However, Zembylas, Theodorou, & Pavlakis (2008) emphasised the importance and range of adult learners’ emotional response to online learning, and the significance of their interpretations of those emotions. Zembylas et al. (2008) and Zembylas (2008) argued that it was important to consider the social and cultural contexts of the learners to take account of their emotional responses.

Away from the realm of online learning, the ‘affective turn’ (Clough, 2007) in the humanities and social sciences, has begun to influence educationalists seeking new theoretical tools to explore the relationships between emotions and learning (Zembylas 2014b; Zembylas 2014a; Helmsing 2014; Mulcahy 2012). The social and technological environment of online learning and the evidence of complex emotional responses among participants indicate that such ‘a deeper exploration of the entanglements between the psychic and the social’ (Zembylas 2014a, 3) could also

usefully illuminate the experience of learning online. The next section will, therefore, discuss the potential of affect studies for online pedagogy.

### *Affect and online learning*

Affect can therefore be understood as the intensity characteristic of passion, will, mood or investment (Grossberg 1992), or the bodily, autonomic sensation of being alive (Massumi 2002). Grossberg (1992) distinguished between emotion and affect. Emotions could be understood, he maintained, as a product of signification, while affect is asignifying - the embodied experience that exists prior to cognitive recognition and representation (as a particular emotion, for example). As Massumi described it, the emotional qualification acts 'to re-register an already felt state, for the skin is faster than the word' (Massumi 2002, 25). Our emotions are, therefore, drawn from 'within the affective states in which we already find ourselves' (Grossberg 1992, 81).

Highly relevant to the experience of online learning, affect has been explored 'in relation to the technologies that are allowing us both to 'see' affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body's organic-physiological constraints' (Clough 2007: 2). For example, Silva (2012) explored the use of the mobile phone as an 'affective technology' among low income neighbourhoods in Brazil. Silva (2012) illuminated the emotional relationships users had with their mobile phones, which had the capacity to make them feel 'great happiness', 'socially included' and 'a refined person'. This kind of investigation of the relation between 'bodies, technology and matter' (Clough 2007: 2) underpinned Dean's (2010) analysis of blogging, in particular our immersion in the feedback loops that characterize 'constant-contact media addiction' (Zaitchik cited in Dean 2010, 97). Dean considered that online communication flows involved the constant movement of affect:

affective networks produce feelings of community, or what we might call ‘community without community’. They enable mediated relationships that take a variety of changing, uncertain and interconnected forms as they feed back each upon the other in ways we can never fully account for or predict (Dean 2010, 96).

Our capture within the feedback loops of social media produces a fragile and risky enjoyment, always teetering on anxiety, which is an outcome of contemporary ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean 2010, 92).

Wetherell suggested that the aspect of affect that has most intrigued theorists is the way that emotional states seem to be able to leap with a mysterious rapidity from body to body. These embodied responses come upon us without warning and without will. Affects are, therefore, pre-conscious, embodied states that are always in motion. Affects happen too quickly for them to be the result of conscious reflections, taking place outside of what the mind is explicitly aware of, and as such, can be said to be ‘exceed’ experience (Wetherell 2012, 57). This has led thinkers influenced by the philosophy of Deleuze to emphasise the potentiality of affect. Massumi (Massumi 2002), for example, understood affect as virtual. Massumi argued that the virtual was ‘the mode of reality implicated in the emergence of new potentials’ or ‘the reality of change’ (Massumi 1998, 16). The most critical aspect of affect, therefore, is that it is all about change – affect is not yet decided, holding multiple possibilities for interpretation, and not tied down to a specific, private, emotional state.

Wetherell’s own understanding of affect combined insights from the sociologist Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984) and social (i.e. non-clinical) psychoanalysis to create a view of affect that takes account of the way affect is experienced and performed (or

practiced) in personalised ways by ‘polyphonic and heteroclitic subjectivities taking shape in complex, unfinished and plural social relations’ (Wetherell 2012, 128). In doing so, Wetherell suggested that affect is not necessarily incompatible with theorisations of discourse and signification. Wetherell suggested that the speed at which an affective response overtakes us indicates that affect is outside of consciousness inasmuch as it moves us without our knowledge of what it is. This is because our affective responses are inevitably related to ‘a large unarticulated hinterland of possible semiotic connections and meaning trajectories’ (129) that exceed our full understanding and always have the potential to be woven into new formations. Wetherell made connections with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as a set of embodied dispositions, which while consciously learnt, are remembered as an automatic response to the social world. Affect is beyond meaning-making because we have had too many unarticulated experiences that play a part in producing it. Yet, as we process affect, certain meanings come to the fore, drawn out of the multiplicity of potential but unrealised meanings by a train of complex connections and associations that each provide a trigger for the other, before they disappear from view. These many other possibilities remain unformulated, but could equally provide the ground for alternative, competing narratives of our experience. For Wetherell, our psycho-social histories are part, therefore, of our affective practice and we are all constantly engaged in managing our ‘affects, our relations with others, habits, emotional repertoires and emerging situations’ (135).

Wetherell’s conception of affective practice could illuminate the complex experience of learning online, and the ways that feelings such as ‘confusion’ are not straightforward to understand. The potentiality of affect could help show how to

support ways of shaping affective experiences such as ‘confusion’ into productive learning experiences. The aim of this research, therefore, was to explore doctoral students’ affective practice within an online educational environment. In order to do this a case study approach with multiple sources of evidence was adopted (Yin 2008), outlined in the next section

### **Research design**

The research focused on two cohorts of students studying an online postgraduate programme, comprising 24 students, both male and female, working within the Higher Education sector in Asia (Bahrain, Japan, Singapore, UAE), Africa (Malawi, Uganda, Zambia), North America (Canada, USA) and Europe (France, Switzerland, UK). At the time of the research, there were 145 students on the programme coming from 42 countries. One cohort of students was studying the second of nine ten week modules on the programme, while the other was taking the ninth module, and just about to begin the final 18 month thesis stage. Student performance within the discussion forum and learning team activities during the online modules was assessed with individual tutor feedback provided weekly, and two longer assignments were assessed, also with individual tutor feedback, half-way through and at the end of the module. While the grades for these activities did not impact the eventual outcome of the programme, the students needed to pass the module to progress, and the majority of the students set very high standards for themselves, making the grades and feedback an important feature.

The researchers both taught on the programme, each teaching one of the modules, and as such were able to introduce the students to assignment feedback using screencasts (also known as video podcasts or vodcasts) using the freely available Jing screencasting software. The findings of existing research indicate that the use of

podcasting feedback (PAF) may produce positive affective responses from students (Savin-Baden 2010), particularly video podcasts (Mann, Wong, & Park 2009). Our research aimed to explore what kind of responses these and other more traditional pedagogical and technological approaches evoked. We informed the students of our research project at the beginning of the module and conducted a survey mid way through the module, assuring them that their responses would be anonymous, which elicited 16 responses (completion rate of 66.7%). Thereafter, to mitigate the potential power imbalance between tutor and student, each researcher invited students from the other researcher's class to be interviewed via Skype, and nine hour-long, in-depth interviews were conducted at the completion of the modules. Neither researcher had taught the cohort of students approached. Ethical approval was obtained based on our data collection plan.

The survey was designed to investigate students' experience of embodied affective states, indicated by intensity and movement. Rather than focus simply on recounting discrete emotional states, students were asked to report the intensity with which they experienced emotions and the extent to which their feelings changed over time.

Descriptive statistical analysis of the responses to quantitative questions from the survey, and content analysis of the qualitative responses created an overview of the affective experiences of online students. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used to elicit initial codes from the interviews, which were then combined to identify common patterns across the students' responses. The aim of the thematic analysis was to provide "a rich, overall description" of the way participants expressed feelings associated with online learning (Braun & Clarke 2006, 83). Using NVivo software, incidences where participants discussed their feelings whilst studying online

were identified. These were separated into positive and negative affects, and subsequently patterns across the data set were identified.

In order to elucidate fully the complexity of online students' affective practices, it was also necessary to focus on the individual differences between participants as well as on their commonality of experiences. In keeping with researchers' observations that 'many people use short narrative-style stories like this to convey or illustrate complex emotional or social feelings' (Wiles, Rosenberg, & Kearns 2005, 97), participants regularly offered narrative accounts of their feelings whilst studying online. As Cortazzi (2001, 384) argued, 'narratives do not simply report events but rather give a teller's perspective on their meaning, relevance and importance'. Narrative analysis (Cortazzi 2001, 2008; Labov 1972) of the interviews was, therefore, able to provide additional insight into the data, particularly in relation to messy data that indicates contradiction as well as conformity. Narrative elements of the interview transcript were coded with Labov's (1972) elements of a narrative: Abstract (A): the subject - what the story is about; Orientation (O): the setting and characters - what the listener needs to know); Complicating Action (CA ): the problem or turning point in the narrative; Evaluation (E): what the narrative means; Resolution (R): the outcome or solution; The Coda (C): the return to the present.

The elements may not all be present in any one narrative, and certain elements have greater potential for the social researcher than others. For example, Cortazzi (2008, 160) highlights the significance of the evaluative function of the narrative, which, by indicating the kind of response the teller desires, 'presents the speaker's perspective on the content'. Orientation within the narrative might also be considered especially illuminating, since it reveals what narrator thinks the listener needs to know to

understand the story, potentially including features of their own and others' identity they consider crucial, and other aspects of the situation.

### **The context of students' online affective practice**

Findings from the survey of the two cohorts of students provided evidence that the experience of studying online produced a range and depth of feelings, across a spectrum of positive and negative (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1 shows that a proportion of students reported experiencing a number of feelings with intensity, particularly the positive feelings of pleasure (40%), satisfaction (31%), excitement (20%) and belonging (19%). In terms of negative feelings, the highest reports were of intensity related to feeling upset (20%). Nevertheless, 75% and 50% collectively reported feeling moderate or intense levels of frustration and anger respectively, and 44% reported experiencing moderate levels of fear. Other descriptions of feelings volunteered by respondents included those below:

Disappointment (#16)

Privileged - intense Encouragement – intensely (#13)

Anxiety at not being able to understand a concept/topic. Anxiety at not being able to complete tasks/assignments on time (#11)

Stressed - due to the time scales. Pressured due to the fact that the learning groups don't seem to work or get together when a task needs to be realised (#2)

Survey respondents reported that their feelings had changed over the course of the programme suggesting students experienced affect as unfinished rather than fixed states (Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Additional comments provided by participants indicated a positive sense of growth as well as frustration:

I now feel secure and comfortable (#13)

An increased sense of support from fellow students and the tutor; far more frustration with the admin side ... Increased sense of empowerment and being a contributor to the process (more equal) (#12)

More skillful. Better equipped to move forward. Sense of accomplishment (#7)

A key characteristic of affect for Wetherell (2012) is the speed with which it overtakes an individual. Participants indicated this sense of surprise at the intensity of their feelings online:

I am surprised at the build up in emotion when I receive feedback from my tutor. It does feel as though I am working in isolation even though there is a forum for discussion. Responses are received from my peers, which is always a relief. I feel I belong to a group of fellow learners but that I am working alone. It's an unusual feeling to get used to (#11).

A strange kind of attachment to online class mates and tutors whom I have never met physically (#15)

I thought I would not like it, but I did not realise how much I would be disappointed with the lack of replication to an actual real classrooms (#16)

### **Sites of intensity for students' affective practice online**

Analysis of the interview data and survey responses overall showed that students experienced both positive and negative affects. Thematic analysis indicated that these, often contrasting, affective responses circulated around three sites of intensity: a sense of progression; community interaction and assignment feedback. These were not stable sites – rather they were places akin to Grossberg's (1992, 282) concept of 'affective magnets', albeit lacking the ideological force of his term: "transit lines" that control the trajectories and define the spaces of everyday life'. Students expressed both positive and negative feelings around each of these themes, but the theme remained the intersection of these affects. For example, there were many positive statements of a sense of progression on the programme (names are pseudonyms):

after every module, I feel growth (Fiona)

you're moving forward, all that sense of kind of pride and achievement are all good (Nicole)

These feelings included a sense that the online mode enabled students' professional, personal and study lives to be fully integrated, so that they could apply their learning easily to their professional contexts, and combine their home and work lives with study (I don't have to worry about driving anywhere. However, when students felt their progression was in some way hindered, they expressed negative sentiments:

it's been a nightmare at times – you know it's Christmas Eve and you have to do a 500 word post [...] I mean everybody wants to celebrate Christmas.

What's the point? (Rosa)

not having the time to prepare a great assignment because I had family obligations or complications so you feel that you're doing everything at 50% 60% everything is getting done but you're not able to put your best work into it, into any of the things that you're doing (Frank)

there were just times that you cannot do what you want to do, it's, the grade comes in as a C and that was really discouraging for me (Nicole)

Students expressed positive affects around the sense of belonging to a 'global community' (Ewan) enabled by online study. Students put a high value on the possibility of genuine interaction ('wonderful conversations') with geographically dispersed peers when it occurred:

there are people that I know if we were sitting round the table we would get on extremely well and in that way it felt really great to have that connection with people... from so many different places (Kurt)

they will say that's a good question. Things like that have inspired me. Being told you have written something well is great as you don't get that from your peers in a classroom (Elise)

However, the lack of embodied communication within the online environment was also felt to limit the extent of the connection that could be experienced, and produce greater anxiety:

[offline] you can read their body language, then you know whether what you have said is right or not. Whereas online you depend on the words - they have to write it so that you can read it (Isabelle)

This feeling was exacerbated by the insistence on academic conventions of communication in the discussion forums:

sitting in the classroom, your teacher asks a question, then you're not going to sit there and flip open a book and read a quote! (Nicole)

The importance of immediate communication also figured strongly in students' reported feelings around receiving feedback from their tutors – students appreciated the volume of feedback, its accessible, concise, private and constructive nature, but expressed a desire for more 'two way communication' (Omar):

it would be nice to have that one-on-one so that the instructor to get a sense of your context or what you're interested in (Kurt)

The experience of getting feedback via screencast was felt by all students to be positive (with two reservations relating to accessibility and privacy), and could provide 'the way to fill this gap' (Omar). A detailed analysis of the affordances of this form of technology for embodied, personalised feedback is required, but is outside the scope of this paper.

However, the feelings expressed by the students were far from finished. Participants would often adopt more than one perspective when commenting on a particular aspect of online learning. For example, several students expressed a frustration with the inflexible deadlines and with a sense that written feedback was formulaic. Neither of these might be considered a feature exclusive to online programmes, but they can

both take on a new form online, since deadlines are often imposed with greater regularity online to motivate participation, often invading students' personal space at weekends and holidays to encourage the use of 'free' time for study. Similarly, the lack of physical contact with tutors and peers can exacerbate the importance of feedback online. However, participants' responses to these issues were not unequivocal. For example, although Frank complained that 'Yeah I had to give a paper in on Christmas day and another paper on New Year's Eve and that's the second year like that', he went on to comment that 'but I know the deadlines set from the first day I started the program'. This kind of internal dialogue was also provided by Omar trying to identify why he felt the online environment could be deficient for feedback:

Of course, even when you are studying face-to-face you get comments on your reports or assignments, but still there is someone to further explain it, if you are not clear about any comment or feedback. And I guess there is still an opportunity, even with this online feedback, but again there is some component of hesitation that you know ... So yeah, I think maybe in a face-to-face environment, it could be you know more open than in the online environment.

It is possible to see the movement of affect in these accounts, rather than simply a list of emotions. Wetherell (2012, 12) considered that affect was 'always "turned on" and "simmering" ... coming in and out of focus'. A focus on the individual narratives sequences within the participants' interviews illuminates the uneven flow of their affective practice online. The next section will present a narrative analysis of two excerpts from the interviews to illustrate this idea further.

### **Narratives of affect online**

Thematic analysis of the interview data indicated that participants experienced both positive and negative affects, but this may inadvertently obscure some of the complexity within these reports. Narrative analysis can return the ‘messiness’ to this data, focusing attention on the feelings’ potential to change state. The narratives are effective in revealing the peaks and flows of affect. In line with Wetherell (2012, 12)’s accounts of the various manifestations of affect, the students appeared to experience a shifting set of ‘background feelings’ (Wetherell 2012) as they juggled multiple commitments and identities, domestic and professional alongside their studies, some of which reached intensity and then resided. Narrative analysis points to the strategies and conventions used by the narrator to tell the tale. Narratives from two participants’ accounts are presented below to illustrate this, Rosa’s narrative and Nicole’s narrative.

#### ***Rosa’s narrative***

Rosa’s narrative was focused on the ways that, she felt ‘ I’m really not a very good example’, indicating that her experiences of online were untypically negative. Her orientation was focused on making clear that she went into the programme with a positive mindset, that she was not a negative person, finding the programme rewarding in some ways, but was ultimately deeply disappointed:

I thought the online would be very different. I think the positive is being able to be with people from all around the world and exchanging on the subject of topic. Because you really learn a lot from each other and that is very interesting.

However, the complication for her were the demands of online study: 'I applied for the online program because I thought it would be flexible but it is anything but flexible so that's a negative part.'

While Rosa recounted disappointments, she wanted to make clear that the programme had the potential to meet her expectations:

And the second negative part is that I'm a visual person so I love Josie [tutor] because I've been on Skype with her I know her little bit – we talked about our kids our vacation – there's something besides the doctorate. There is some kind of – I wouldn't say emotional link – but something.

It is this lack of emotional link with others, therefore, that Rosa points to as the ultimate point of her story: 'And that is what you don't experience with the cohort. Mostly you feel there's an absence around the whole thing to do with seeing people – our embodied communication with people'.

Reflecting on Rosa's narrative, while it is very much a tale of disappointment, it is far from a straightforwardly negative orientation to the online environment. Rosa starts her narrative by denying its exemplary value, but continues to relate the incident anyway. By employing a denial, Rosa indicates that she has a sense that others in her cohort may have had a more positive experience of online study - that a good experience may be possible. Focusing on the points of orientation in her narrative, she shows reflexivity in anticipating (and rejecting) the possibility that the fault was with her for not being open to others in the environment. Similarly, it is important that she

communicates her developed communication skills ('I'm a visual person') in case this is misunderstood. Her account of her Skype conversations with her tutor reveal glimpses of the 'something' that Rosa feels is lacking online – her sense of unrealized potential.

### *Nicole's narrative*

Nicole's narrative also provides an account of the affective flows that accompany the online experience. Nicole's abstract statement initiates a story about growing confidence and an increasingly positive experience of online study. Nicole recounts a narrative about the journey to comfort from discomfort in the online experience:

I feel much more comfortable. Doing the whole thing online and manoeuvring through Blackboard<sup>1</sup> much more comfortable doing that than I did a year and a half ago or however long it was when I started this programme. So that part, yeah, you do start to feel more comfortable in the classroom, you get a flow of how to post and not post, you kind of get a feel of what's happening.

Within her account there are references to sources of potential discomfort, such as the possibility of being 'stressed over a post', which she has overcome:

That's satisfying in terms of, you know, I don't feel stressed over a post, where do I go? Those first couple of modules were really kind of scary!

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<sup>1</sup> The Virtual Learning Environment used in the online programme

Her narrative then introduced a reflection that fears she may have felt about the online environment could have been conflated with anxiety over her intellectual abilities, indicating another level of complexity:

I was more scared about my own ability, if I was going to be able to do it. I've always, you know, under grad, grad school, whatever the case may be, you know As and Bs were my standard and so I wanted to achieve that. And like I said before, there were just times that you cannot do what you want to do, it's, the grade comes in as a C and that was really discouraging for me. And so I had to ... Mary [tutor] helped me work through that a couple of times, you know.

Nicole provided an evaluation that she had developed a strategy of lowering her high expectations of herself in order to manage her feelings:

You just can't do it all the time, you know, I couldn't put myself through that sort of anxiety for the next two years. There was a couple of weeks or so that I could not perform to my standard.

Nicole's narrative indicates that the navigation through the online environment can provoke feelings of 'stress': 'where do I go?'. This account of 'manoeuvring through Blackboard' shows that some (emotional) labour that is required to 'get a grip on things' (Dreyfus 2001, 57) within the 'scary' online environment. This narrative indicates that features that may be considered pedagogically trivial (such as the effective design of navigation in VLEs) are not. Nevertheless, Nicole does not finish

the narrative there, and loops back to reflect that the underlying source of her fear about not knowing where to post was her apprehension that her scholarly abilities might be lacking. This fragment of the narrative provides a snapshot of the way affect may operate online – frustration flares but, as it subsides, becomes subject to reflection and reinterpretation, revealing, in this case, deeper anxieties. Nicole’s insistence on orientating the listener to her good grades, communicates this deeper anxiety – her scholastic capabilities are important to her personal and professional identity. The tight deadlines, technology and multiple commitments that are characteristic of the online learning experience threaten to undermine this identity by pushing students to perform at a level below their own expectations (‘there were just times that you cannot do what you want to do’).

Nicole’s narrative shows how these complicated feelings can become bundled together as waves of affect. Wetherell (2012, 159) defines affective practice as ‘a moment of recruitment and often synchronous assembling of multimodal resources, including, most crucially, body states’. Nicole’s narrative communicates the body state of the online learner as potentially perpetually anxious, but also as constituting a social actor involved in a process of negotiation, reflection and interpretation.

Nicole’s narrative resolution involves her account of how her tutor ‘helped me work through that a couple of times, you know’, showing the way an effective cycle of communication between teacher and student has helped (temporarily) to stabilize these body states, whilst simultaneously indicating the rhythm of their movement in and out of focus.

As learners and teachers, therefore, it is important that we understand the impact of learning technologies on our interactions. We need to look for background affective responses and intermittent surges of affect that will inevitably be there.

Understanding that students' body states are in motion, and their feelings unfinished, susceptible to moments of intensity, which may subsequently subside, can help inform our pedagogy of online learning. We can seek to design learning environments that more effectively communicate the body states of the learners and teachers (for example, with sound and video) and reduce vulnerabilities and frustrations (for example, by designing environments with high usability and consistent navigation paths). However, knowing that affective responses will occur, but that they are unfinished and indefinite, means that there is all the more reason for teachers can to endeavour to become "hyper-readers" who actively listen to the other's bodily responses online' (Kazan 2007, 252) since it is possible to intercept those feelings before they endure as negative states.

## **Conclusion**

This project explored doctoral students' affective practice within the online environment. In conclusion, the paper argues that critical reflection on students' affective responses to the online environment should inform the pedagogy of technology enhanced learning within online education. Thematic analysis of the interview data showed students experienced affects circulating around three sites of intensity: progression, community interaction and feedback. Positive and negative feelings were recounted by students relating to communication online, academic demands of the course, time pressures, relationship with tutor and peer feedback, and the technological environment. However, in order to put the themes into context, techniques of narrative analysis (Cortazzi 2008) were also applied, indicating multi-layered interpretations of these feelings. Paying attention to the narrative functions of orientation and evaluation that participants used in relating their experience revealed the depth and complexity of their affective responses. Such an approach has

implications for the way we design the online environment to allow students to experience the full potential of online learning. Kazan (2007) suggested that learning and teaching online involves an ethical relation to the other with whom one communicates. We should always be wary that ‘there is always more than what we see on the screen, more than can be contained in those typed words’ (Kazan, 2007: 266).

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