

The affective domain and social networking: definitorial issues and misleading assumptions

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1. Introduction

Higher education goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge to “inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfillment” [1]. Ramsden’s statement clearly indicates that education is about more than transmitting information (usually considered as the cognitive domain of learning). What seems to be neglected is generically called the ‘affective domain’, encompassing the enjoyment of or passion for teaching, and the interest or enthusiasm of students to learn. It is unfortunate, that passion in education is rarely researched by educators themselves, yet being passionate about one’s own teaching is a crucial condition to get students excited or interested [2].

The purpose of this position paper is to share initial experiences from our foray into researching the affective domain. While primarily looking for conceptualizations of the affective domain - our research was also motivated by an interest in social networking and whether technology could remedy some of the problems coming with models of Higher Education that encourage care-free attitudes towards students and class sizes that actually prevent educators from getting to know their students in any substantial way [3].

Our research raised four questions:

1. How can we operationalise the affective domain?
2. What are known issues in approaching the affective domain?
3. How can we relate educational technology in general and social networking in particular to our understanding of the affective domain?
4. What assumptions might be misleading in our effort to find answers to the preceding questions?

Our first three questions are intended to inform educational designs on- and off-line, while defining educational design as a blend of process, products and policies [4]. The fourth question, however, was added after various preliminary discussions around the

affective domain that indicated the need to examine our implicit assumptions about students and disciplines as well as our thoughts about what role technology and affect *should* have in education.

1 Definitorial issues around the affective domain

The affective domain of education is a relatively little understood phenomenon. References to the affective domain can be found in a number of fields of research, such as Csikszentmihalyi's [5] theory of flow - arguing that relating positively to a field of study favours learning – or studies of overall course satisfaction [6]. However, linking Web 2.0 technologies to developments within the affective domain requires an understanding of the affective domain that allows for (technologically mediated) activities. Following, we review two well-known positions concerning the affective domain, firstly, of learning [7] and secondly, of teaching [8]. Both conceptualisations highlight the importance of getting support for or being able to form, articulate and negotiate ones' values within a community.

1.1 Krathwohl's et al. affective domain of learning

Krathwohl's et al [7] handbook on the affective domain was 'spurred' by the success of their previous study developing a taxonomy of learning objectives in the cognitive domain. The authors described the affective domain in terms of another process, the internalisation of values. Learner activities seen as conducive to the internalisation of values are: (1) building up awareness, (2) attaching emotional significance, (3) committing to a value, (4) developing a more complex set of values and (5) integrating values into a more general world view [7].

The above characterisation already shows the semantic difficulties of defining the affective domain in behavioural terms that would make it possible to demonstrate or assess changes in that area. Krathwohl and colleagues [7] recognised two major issues: (a) changes in people's value systems could take substantial time and (b) any description of affective objectives would face serious challenges on a semantic level since formulations such as "students should appreciate, value or care for x" could be interpreted in any number of ways.

1.2 Preliminary thoughts on the affective domain of teaching

Although previous work such as Krathwohl and colleagues [7] conceptualisation of the affective domain can inform the meaning of the 'affective domain of teaching', a definition that relates to a lecturer's work environment has been considered indispensable. Cranton [9] makes clear that academics already have a set of values that motivates their teaching. Only if these values clash with what is presented as 'good teaching' or cannot be maintained in face of changing teaching conditions (e.g.

increased class sizes etc), teachers start re-evaluating their existing value-systems (ibid). Prompted by the lack of a model of the affective domain of teaching, we started a series of phenomenographic interviews in order to better understand what particular experiences shape teachers' value sets, what challenges or confirms their values and finally, how do teachers reflect about and change their values over time. While this is still research in progress, a first review of the literature as well as the analysis of some first pilot interviews led us to picture the affective domain of teaching as a continuous balancing act, where trade-offs between sometimes conflicting teaching objectives have to be made. Figure 1 presents some of the dimensions along which these trade-offs had to be made.

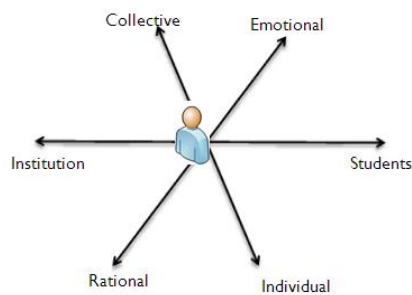


Figure 1: Conceptualising the affective domain of teaching

1.3 Implications for technologically enhanced networking

Although networked learning and social networking has been researched widely and from a variety of angles, our understanding of networking in an educational context is still limited. We are not yet sure whether we ask the right questions and look at data that matter, rather than choosing questions that suit the available data [10]. Hence, we start with activities that have been identified as crucial in the previous two sections - namely the formation, articulation and negotiation of one's values – and link them to those features of networking technologies that enable the management of values: (1) connecting to new members, (2) objectifying interests, (3) defining rules of interaction as well as granting access to resources and (4) supporting sustained discussions [pub. under review].

2 Problematic assumptions

Discussions around benefits of technology-enhanced learning and networking are sometimes hampered by problematic assumptions. Especially Selvyn's recent writing [11, 12] highlights several misleading assumptions which can prevent benefits from materialising as the context of using technology remains uncharted.

2.1 Oversimplifying assumptions

The popularity of social networking sites has also been noticed by some educators, who quickly argued that the pervasiveness of social media shapes new learning styles with the current generation often referred to as 'digital natives' or 'new millennium learners' [13]. However, even though simplified conceptualisations of online learners may help to raise awareness of important issues – e.g. digital literacy versus Prensky's coinage of 'digital natives' – overly flat depictions of online learning can easily lead to distorted perceptions of students' reality [12].

2.2 Assumption of uniformity

One of the underlying problems in any broad application of ideas or technology to an educational context is the lack of uniformity within the environment. Higher Education is not a monoculture, and different disciplines will obviously demonstrate their own needs and priorities. As simple as this may seem, it may not merely be a matter of tweaking the larger idea for slightly different purposes. In fact, the understanding of how knowledge is to be communicated, valued and understood, and how community is to be defined in both the classroom and in relation to the material being presented, may vary widely between disciplines. Business, engineering and humanities related studies may not only present different course materials and outcomes, but may also present or encourage different values and ideological perspectives, potentially relating directly to networking and technology itself.

2.3 Ideologically driven assumptions about the value of learning technologies

A possible reason for resistance to networking technology's presence in the classroom may be ideological, with different disciplines not necessarily sharing or promoting the same values related to knowledge and learning, despite being part of the same educational institution. This may go so far as to question the underlying assumption of 'learners' technologically inclined expectations' and 'the needs of a 21st century society' [14]. While it may be assumed that teachers re-evaluate their value systems over time and in a changing environment [9], there is no reason to believe that this change will always benefit educational technology, an idea which is backed up by the 'switching off' concept of teaching.

2.4 Idealistic assumptions about cognitive and affective support in communities

The problem of a group approach to learning is accentuated with the idea of dominant nodes (hubs) in networks, potentially isolating the smaller and less dominant members of the network. This is problematic enough in a cognitive environment,

where, as with wikis and Wikipedia, popular opinion may begin to present itself as fact, simply because it is the popular, and dominant, opinion [15].

Further, while relationships within networks may allow for peer discussion and clarification, potentially non-specific, possibly primarily affective, outcomes may not be aided by a group approach, especially when the core focus is on the affective notion of integrating the object of study into one's own notion of self. The focus on the group approach to this may marginalise differing and minority viewpoints or prevent self-exploration for those who immediately find superficial group validation. This superficiality may be accentuated if the network is spread over multiple media, potentially allowing for an active presence over a variety of platforms, but not necessarily demanding an in-depth one on any one platform.

3 Conclusion

The first part of this brief position paper has described ways of conceptualising the affective domain of learning and teaching. In doing so, we have identified the management of personal values as a central element to operationalise the affective domain. Based on our primarily theoretical conceptualisation, we suggest that evaluating technological features for their capacity to support the formation, articulation and negotiation of individual values within a community is a constructive step from theories towards practical changes in didactical settings. Finally, we highlight four assumptions we found problematic during our work and which need to be revisited over time if our effort to introduce social networking is to be meaningful to and accepted by educators and students.

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