Chapter 8

Taking a Hard Look at the Soft Skills of Online Course Design and Online Teaching in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, substantial growth has occurred in online education in general, and this has been particularly true of the higher education sector. Most universities and post-secondary institutions now offer students the opportunity to enroll in online pre-tertiary, vocational, undergraduate and/or postgraduate courses. While some of these courses are successful for the learners who enroll in them, others have been found somewhat deficient, often criticized for their lack of humanization, interaction, communication and online presence. This chapter examines the role of the so-called soft skills of online course design and online teaching that are seen as vital for online educators who are responsible for the facilitation of high quality online learning. Along with a review of relevant literature about the soft skills of online teaching, the chapter presents three institutional case studies from which a set of practically-focused recommendations for promoting the design of humanized online learning environments has been developed.

INTRODUCTION

Overwhelmingly, research has established the link between a teacher’s approach to teaching and students’ learning approaches (Prosser & Trigwell, 1998; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). Similarly, the way in which online courses are designed and taught has been shown to influence the way in which students learn in online courses. There may also be a relationship between the emotional aspects of
teaching and learning that are typically played out in the application of soft skills, an issue explored by Becker, Goetz, Morger and Ranellucci’s study (2014) which focused on “the relationship between teachers’ emotions, their instructional behavior, and students’ emotions in class” (p. 15). Other soft skills, such as teacher non-verbal immediacy, have been explored in relationship to student cognitive learning (Rodríguez, Plax, & Kearney, 1996). Soft skills encompass a variety of emotional and relational aspects of teaching including, but not limited to, communication, integrity, time management, self-management, self-esteem, etiquette, sociability, teamwork, cultural competence, flexibility, and empathy. Meanwhile, the experiences of students engaged in online courses within higher education contexts have not always been positive, and the way in which these experiences are influenced by the skills of online instructors remains under-researched.

While the success of some online courses has been attributed to the availability of the instructor, opportunities for interaction with other students and the provision of clear learning directions and expectations (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010), the lack of these characteristics has been associated with unsatisfactory and ineffective learning experiences (Etherington, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2002; Paxton, 2003). For example, some students report feeling disconnected, lonely and isolated from others (Kear, Chetwynd, & Jefferis, 2014; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003), confused about what is expected of them (Garrison, 2006), and lacking in direction and opportunities for interaction (Hun Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2007; Russo & Benson, 2005). These well known deficits of online learning contexts may be addressed by online instructors who have relevant soft skills appropriate to facilitating online learning, some of which have been described along with sets of technical and pedagogical online teaching skills (Archambault, 2008; Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Cleveland-Innes & Ally, 2006; Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeple, & Tickner, 2001; Lehman & Conceicao, 2010; Northcote, Seddon, & Brown, 2011; Van Duzer, 2002; White & Weight, 2000). There is potential for online instructors to demonstrate soft skills in the way they design and develop online courses, as well as in their ability to teach online and to facilitate online learning activities. The significance of online instructors’ soft skills can be described in association with the role of emotionality and affect in adult learning (Becker et al., 2014; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Israel, Kamman, McCray, & Sindelar, 2014; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011). Furthermore, the soft skills of online educators are often related to communication and interpersonal issues which, when operationalized, promote online learning environments underpinned by principles of social constructivism (Mbati, 2013; Perkins, 2006) and connectivism (Siemens, 2005).

Just as teaching is an affective process, learning, too, is an emotional journey (White & Weight, 2000) and much research has been devoted in recent years to establishing a connection between affective learning issues and cognitive learning outcomes (Baker, 2004; Chick, Karis, & Kernahan, 2009; Garrison, 2006; Rodríguez et al., 1996; Russo & Benson, 2005). In fact, some studies of adult learning have focused primarily on affective learning outcomes (Cleveland-Innes & Ally, 2006). Just as the process of learning can be an emotional journey for students, the process of teaching for learning is also emotional. Learning and teaching do not become less emotional just because they may occur within an online context. This link between affective and cognitive learning is also relevant when university educators learn about the principles and practices of online course design and teaching, and develop soft skills that are applied in online courses. The title of Hagenauer and Volet’s (2014) work, “I don’t think I could, you know, just teach without any emotion”: Exploring the nature and origin of university teachers’ emotions, highlights the crucial role of emotions in university teaching. The connection between emotions and teaching has also been documented during the process of the “pedagogical training of university teachers” (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011, p. 799). As well as developing technical and