Building Empathy in Online Courses: Effective Practical Approaches

Richard G. Fuller, Department of Education and Graduate Studies, Robert Morris University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

ABSTRACT

This research study examined the empathetic practices of effective higher education faculty from seven universities that offer online programs. Using a phenomenological approach with a purposeful sample of fourteen faculty interviews identified eight common themes of practice that faculty employ to promote empathy in the online higher education arena.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been known that instructors who provide empathy in the classroom develop a strong rapport with their students and facilitate a positive learning environment. The positive role of empathy in interpersonal relationships has been shown throughout the literature as an effective component for instructional success and to promote learning (Rey, 2001; Mestre, Semper, & Frias, 2002). Ten Dam and Volman (2004, p. 374) acknowledged that elements such as caring, empathy, and involvement are important aspects of facilitating learning. Wlodkowski (2008) stated that for instructors to be effective they must have expertise, empathy, enthusiasm and clarity. Empathy provides teachers the ability to understand students’ reactions from the inside, a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seem to students (Rogers, 1969). While it has been found that caring on the part of teachers improves outcomes in face-to-face environments it becomes equally important to understand how best to promote a sense of empathy in the online learning and teaching environments.

Holmberg (2003) found that feelings of empathy and belonging within a distance education format influenced the learning favorably and promoted students’ motivation to learn. Holmberg further stated that empathy is helped through interactions where students are addressed directly and the conversational approach is employed. The opportunities for spontaneous interaction in today’s on-line education environment underscore the necessity for an empathetic approach to assure that...
clarity of expectations and meaningful learning is occurring.

The fundamental principle for effective on-line teaching is for instructors to derive a realistic understanding of learners’ needs and their expectations of the online program, while adapting the instruction to the learners’ level of skill and perspective. The distance learning environment often assumes a shared responsibility between teacher and learner to precipitate learning. In distance education learners tend to be autonomous, self-directed learners who take control of their own learning and seek the advice and direction of instructors and other students when concepts or directions are not clear. Thus distance education students reflect an interactive collaborative construction of knowledge, a system that typifies the concepts of adult education theory (Anderson et al., 2002). Kunaka and Jugdev (2006) suggest there is an absence of research literature on the use of intervention activities within on-line courses to facilitate the empathy described by Holmberg (2001).

While empathy and instructor presence may appear the same, they are different for the purposes of this research. Presence is the instructor being visible and active in a course which does play a role in promoting empathy. Empathetic practice however goes deeper and is the ability for the instructor to understand online student’s needs being constantly aware of how they are receiving and processing information. In the online environment empathy takes on increased relevance.

Holmberg (1999) believed that if a course consistently represents a communication process that is felt to have the character of a conversation then empathy is practiced and the students will be more motivated and more successful than if it has an impersonal textbook character. He suggested the “conversational character” is accomplished through real conversation and by the use of a conversational style in printed and recorded subject matter. Holmberg found that his empathetic communication theory had great value in relating teaching and learning effectiveness to participant feelings of belonging and cooperation as well as the interactions that come from questions, answers, and arguments in mediated communications.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practices of effective online graduate and undergraduate instructors who promote empathy. This study focused on understanding how the online teaching technologies and the innate properties of a Learning Management System (LMS) were being employed to develop empathy and promote interaction. The questions for this study were (a) what are effective methods used in online graduate and undergraduate courses to facilitate empathetic practices, (b) how do online instructors utilize the innate capabilities of an LMS to support empathetic constructs and (c) what are the techniques and strategies faculty employ to foster and facilitate the sense empathy. It was hypothesized that effective faculty employ certain methodologies, practices and mindsets in preactive teaching phases (planning) and active teaching phases to promote empathy when utilizing an LMS.

METHODOLOGIES

The research for this study used a phenomenological approach with a purposeful sample of online university faculty from seven universities with online graduate programs. Empathetic online faculty were identified through program directors from The University of Pittsburgh, Robert Morris University, George Washington University, West Virginia State University, West Chester University, University of Maryland, and Drexel University. Program directors were contacted and requested to identify faculty who (a) promote a high level of empathetic interaction with students through activities and practice that raise the interest and motivation of the students, (b) promote a high level of student empathy through both quantity and quality of communications and practices that maximize the impact of learning, and (c) promote a high
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