

Playing Nice with Others: The Communication of Emotion in an Online Classroom

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This study looks at how emotions are communicated in an online classroom. Specifically the communications of one collaborative group in an online graduate level course were examined for evidence of emotion. Emotions were communicated through typical verbal and extraverbal. These students focused their emotions in three different directions: expressing individual emotions, expressing emotions for the sake of peers, and maintaining the balance among group members through the expression of particular emotion—gratitude, apology, and praise.

Early research looking at emotional content of computer-mediated communication (CMC) was conducted before the Internet and use of email went mainstream. As a result, most CMC users had not yet established communicative norms and conventions to convey emotion that fit the online medium (such as Kiesler, Zubrow, Moses, & Geller, 1985; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986). Those norms become very important when considering how users communicate their emotional states to one another online (Baym, 1995; Rice & Love, 1987). Because these norms had not yet been established in the early research, those results focused more on which elements of face-to-face communication, such as non-verbal cues, were lost in CMC, rather than on any new elements of CMC communication that users had developed, such as the use of emoticons or smileys (Walther & Burgoon, 1992).

When researchers began to study the emotional content of CMC, they were working in a time when fields such as cognitive science, social psychology, and communication believed that cognition and emotion were two concepts that were not interrelated (such as Gardner, 1985; Mabry, 1998). This belief affected that work as researchers used coding schemes that only allowed for one code per utterance—task-related or socioemotional content (such as Bales, 1950).

Today, many theorists are acknowledging that cognition and emotion as inextricably linked (such as Coles, 1999; LeDoux, 1996). This opens up CMC research to new methods, as emotion may be a part of each utterance. In other words, a user may convey task-related information and emotional content using the same words or symbols (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). I further believe that CMC users are particularly creative in their communications and recent research has already noted some unique norms and conventions developing from CMC (such as Baym, 1995; Poole, 2000). Therefore, I feel that it is important to examine specifically how emotion is communicated online.

Context of the Study

The data for this study consist of archived, computer-based communications as part of a graduate level education course taught completely online. This particular course was divided into collaborative groups, which worked together on all course projects throughout the semester. For each project, different group members took on different roles to facilitate their collaborations. Group members decided who would take which roles and how the work on each project would be organized.

Students in this course communicated primarily through a conferencing software called FirstClass. Within the conference area, each group had its own folder in which messages to the group could be posted publicly. These folders were open to all students to permit cross-group messaging if needed. Students could also send messages to one another and to the course

instructor privately. Students were required to post and reply to messages at least three times a week, but designers of the course recommended that they check the message areas daily.

I chose one particular group based on a prior study of the same context, which focused on the experiences of two students in this course (Luetzelschwab, 2001). Through interviews, Luetzelschwab uncovered the emotional state of one of his informants during the course, and as a result of those findings, I have selected this informant's group as the purposive sample for my study. This informant mentioned that sometimes a problem arose which seemed "to fester for days in the messaging until a level of hysteria [built] up and it [became] a source of extreme frustration. This [contributed] to a sense of abandonment and dissatisfaction with the class in general" (Luetzelschwab, 2001, p. 11). This same informant also characterized the experiences of her colleagues when she said, "I got a lot of private messaging from confused, lost, upset members of the class" (Luetzelschwab, 2001, p. 12). Later in the course, she "noticed that the posted messages got more personal and emotional" (Luetzelschwab, 2001, p. 15). My endeavor was to determine to what extent these emotions came across in the public messages among the members of this group.

Within this particular group, I examined all group members' public communications so that I could consider how several people convey emotions online. I narrowed my data collection to the 137 public messages sent during one collaborative project—from start to finish. This focus provided a range of emotions across different phases of project development from assignation of roles to organization of work, to meeting deadlines. The focus on solely public communications sought to examine each posting in the same way that another member of the group would—without a thorough understanding of the author's intentions.

Data Analysis

Throughout the study, I was engaged in data analysis. Primarily I made constant comparisons among data while looking for emergent themes and patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Also, to assist in data analysis, I met with a peer-debriefing group. A peer-debriefing group serves as a "risk-free forum to test ideas about emerging themes in data" (Spall, 1998, p. 281). It helped by showing me new ways of looking at my data. Another role of the group was to ask questions to help me "understand how [my] personal perspectives and values affect the findings. Such a questioning approach serves to minimize bias within the inquiry" (Spall, 1998, p. 280). My peer-debriefing group for this study consisted of three colleagues who are familiar with both the nature of online communication and the naturalistic methods that I used in my research. We met face-to-face at least two hours per week and communicated through emails as needed.

Results

Communicating Emotion

The students in this class communicated their emotions online using a variety of techniques. Students used these techniques singly and in combination to express their emotions to their peers. At times they used techniques that are typically used in a face-to-face setting: simply putting their emotions into words or using interjections to express their emotions.

Vivian is one student who expressed her emotions by simply putting them into words. For example, after looking for another student's updated work online she stated, "I am confused. Where is the edited file? I pasted a large amount of text you sent into the collaborative document. Is this the correct version?" Her confusion is apparent based on her choice of words in her message. Like Vivian, Vasti communicated her feelings through her message content: "Ann first of all let me tell you what a relief it is to read your messages. You have a way with organizing things and making things easier for the others." Other students could now be aware of Vasti's relief due to the fact that she told them how she was feeling.

Students also used interjections as ways of expressing their emotions. An interjection is an inarticulate exclamation that expresses an emotion. Vivian expressed an end to her confusion when she mentioned to the teaching assistant, "Ah - you moved my original collaborative doc."

She conveyed that she just then realized why she had not been able to find her document online. In fact, you can almost hear the tone of her voice in her expression. The use of an interjection by Ann also gives an auditory quality to her expression of her surprise, “10 pm. Wow! Marielena, that is really late.” Other interjections that the students use repeatedly were “Yeah!!!!!!” to express relief and excitement and “OOPs!!” to express remorse over a misunderstanding or missed deadline. These interjections could have been inserted into a face-to-face conversation for the same effect as they had in the online context.

Besides adopting face-to-face communication methods, students communicated using extraverbal methods, similar to nonverbal communication but uniquely designed for an online environment. Many of these extraverbal methods were used as attention getting devices and for emphasis.

One extraverbal method used was the deliberate use of capitalization. These students chose to mainly use this method in the subject line of their messages. The subject line is what other group members first saw on their screen when they logged into the group’s online space. The emotions conveyed by the use of capitalization were confusion, as in “SERIOUSLY CONFUSED,” and stress relief, as in “PLEASE NOTE!” and “CLARIFICATION.” The fact that capitalization was not found in the content of messages may be the result of the students being familiar with one of the unwritten rules of online communication, which says that typing in all capital letters is the equivalent of screaming. These students chose to use other extraverbal methods to emphasize the emotionality of their messages, in place of “screaming caps.” Students also strategically used punctuation to get others’ attention and to emphasize their emotional messages online. Vivian emphasized her regret and frustration when she included an exclamation point: “I was trying to copy and paste but my computer locked up!” Similarly, Vivian showed her fear of accidentally deleting all of the group’s work when she asked, “I wonder if it is possible for one of us to erase the whole thing by mistake???” and her fear was emphasized by her use of three question marks. Marielena, on the other hand, strategically used punctuation to help the group achieve their goals. She drew attention to valuable contributions of others with the use of an exclamation point, “I think Erin’s observation before are very important!” She also offered support to her peers when she wrote, “I hope this helps you!!” Her use of the exclamation marks here conveys her enthusiasm for offering such support and may be seen by her peers as an indication that she was willing to give similar help in the future. The added emphasis and attention surrounding the strategic use of punctuation is valuable in an online setting.

Also valuable is the ability for the students to modify the appearance of the text in their messages. Within the conferencing software used, students had the ability to change the font, color, and size of their text. Typically students had a certain font, color, and size that they used regularly, but changed this when necessary. Most often these modifications occurred when a student was giving instructions or clarification to others. For example, Vivian changed the appearance of text within her message to emphasize important pieces of information. Her message was predominantly typed in green, but the underlined segment was in red and underlined:

I will start editing on the paper tonight after 11 pm. I will send the first edit out with comments tomorrow - Thursday night after work.

I will leave the collaborative doc as it is for reference in case some of us need to refer back to the original document. **Do not** put any more postings in the collaborative document after 11 pm on Wednesday.

Here Vivian changed color and style to catch the attention of her peers since the information she is conveying is both important and perhaps difficult to understand. Also, she chose to emphasize the words “do not” by making them bold within her already emphasized text. This shift conveyed her concern and fear that another student might change the collaborative document after the deadline, thus making Vivian’s work more difficult.

While the use of extraverbal expressions like strategic use of capitalization and punctuation and modification of the appearance of text serve to grab the reader’s attention and emphasize certain information, use of emotional icons, also known as emoticons or smileys, serve to heighten or flatten the emotional tenor of messages. Some students used emoticons much more often than others. Vasti sometimes added an emoticon to her text to show her peers that she had a positive attitude toward her work. For example, when forced to make a choice among research topics, she expressed: “I just couldn’t decide between the first two ;-)” This line lets her peers

know that Vasti was interested in all topics they were investigating and that she is just as happy letting someone else express their preference. Similarly, one student leader used an emoticon to take the edge off of some of her more serious, work-related, and demanding statements. On the other hand, when Vivian acted as team leader she chose not to use an emoticon and, as a result, her serious and sometimes demanding statements maintained their tone. Finally, students used emoticons to make sure that their peers did not take their messages seriously. During a discussion about one subgroup having to do a little more work than the other subgroups, Vivian pointed out that she believed the distribution of work was fair, “they do have that **extra** person in Office 1 . . . I noted in the chat that this seemed highly unfair and a definite advantage (:” Using the emoticon was one way of making sure that no one would be offended by her remarks—that they were made in jest.

The students used these various online communication techniques to convey their emotions sometimes in a direct manner, naming the feeling. Vivian directly named her feeling when she wrote, “I was beginning to feel a little lonely here in Suite 1.” At other times, Vivian named emotions that perhaps were currently being felt or would be felt by her peers in the future. She noticed that she was sending many project management messages and stated, “I hope my contributions to the planning and structure of this work have been helpful in keeping the stress level down.”

Sometimes students used online communication techniques to convey emotions in an indirect manner—emotions which may or may not be apparent to them. One of these indirect ways occurred when one individual copied another’s communication style, indicating that there was emotional agreement between the two. For example, after a colleague interrupted one of her messages with “hmmm,” Vivian replied, adopting this use of a visual pause when she wrote, “Hmmm it kind of resembles BEZERK.”

Also, students repeated themes in their messages that indicated their emotional preoccupation with certain topics. For some, the preoccupation was with a major concern such as a lack of computer access, and for others it was with a minor concern such as which color they would be able to use when entering information into a collaborative document. Vivian was preoccupied with not working late at night because her job started early in the morning. At one point she told Marielena, “10 pm. [. . .] I usually go to bed around that time because I have to get up to go to work in the mornings.” Another time her strong feelings about her schedule brought up more emotion in a message. Here Vivian was upset that she was unable to complete her work because only one group member could work in the collaborative document on the system at one time. “OK, you guys. who's in the topic paper? I've been waiting for over 30 min to put my references in but can't 'cause I only have read only access. It is now about 9:30, and I am tired so I will have to post my references tomorrow night after I get in because I am sleepy. Good night, all.” These preoccupations led to indirect communication of online emotion.

Another way that these students indirectly communicated their emotions was through the use of qualifying words or phrases that conveyed doubt or uncertainty. For example, Vasti sends the following message along with her work contributions for the week: “I am back. I just got a little lost and maybe confused. I was checking this site regularly but couldn’t get through to the newsletter hence wasn’t sure of what I am supposed to do.” Here she expresses her doubt that her work was completed correctly.

Finally, the students indirectly communicated their emotions online through statements implying their feelings. Vasti expressed her confusion and frustration indirectly when she remarked, “I couldn’t understand how to create collaborative documents maybe somebody could make it more clear to me.” Vivian expressed concern for Vasti when she asked, “does anyone have an alternate e-mail address for my office mate Vasti? She mentioned having some [computer] problems and we haven’t heard from her all week.” Vivian also conveyed frustration and perhaps self-doubt about a technological step she took when she asked, “I wonder if it is possible for one of us to erase the whole thing by mistake???” This indirect communication conveyed different emotions at different times.

It sounds like the students always initiated the composition of messages to express their emotional state, but that was not always the case. Often the emotions were unsolicited, but at other times the emotional expressions were solicited by other students. These solicitations were usually very simple such as, “Let me know what you think” or “Does anyone need any help?” In any case,

these questions solicited the expression of emotion from other students.

Emotional Focus

All of the techniques and catalysts used by the students in this collaborative group helped to convey emotional expressions, and these expressions were focused in several ways. A student could convey emotions with a focus on *me*—individual emotions. When focusing on themselves, students sought to express their emotions such as Vivian’s relief at having finished her work, “Here’s my 2 page synopsis paper due October 2. Whew!” and her confusion in the online environment, “I am confused. Where is the edited file?” Students also sought to soothe their emotions. Specifically, a student who posted a message that was taking action in a new direction was showing her dissatisfaction with the current course of action. Vasti seemed dissatisfied with not having tasks divided among group members when she remarked, “Rather than have both of us cover everything how about we split these four areas up. I can take the first two and you can take the last two.” Similarly, Vivian suggested that group members chat to decide on details of how they will next proceed, “How about setting a time for a chat sometime on the weekend when several of us can make it - then sending a copy of the chat to those who have other commitments for review and comment before any final decisions are made.” Her suggestion was her individual response to her feelings of confusion or frustration.

A student could also convey emotions with a focus on *you* or *us*—emotions that serve a relational purpose. A specific focus on *you* means that the students are expressing their emotions not simply because they feel them, but rather for the sake of the other students. For example, a student may agree with another, as Marielena did when she wrote, “Great idea.” in response to Vivian’s suggestion that the team work together in one collaborative document. Vivian showed that her emotions were directly related to the well-being of other group members, “Has anyone heard from Ruben or John?” Vivian also considered the well-being of her peers when she reminded everyone that “[we] need to treat each others’ work kindly.” In her role of group leader, Vivian explained her actions to make sure that all group members felt good about those actions, “I wanted to clear it with all of you but since we were winding down and most of you had already given final approval, I felt I had to make some kind decision.” Finally, Vivian acknowledged her peers’ feelings regarding her work as group leader, “I am sure it will be EVIL TASKMASTER rather than Maestro by next week.” In all of these examples, the expression of emotion was focused on the feelings of others and could be described as relational.

Another type of emotion focuses on *us*—the individual and others. These are typically emotions that are used to acknowledge that the social balance among group members is no longer even. One way of acknowledging a skewed social balance is through an apology. For example, a student may apologize for her actions as they affect the entire group, “I am sorry guys I am sounding a little panicky but want to be very clear about the modus operandi.” or “Again, I apologize for getting off to such a slow start!!!” Another way of acknowledging the imbalance is through expressions of gratitude. Expressing gratitude is a way of letting others know that you are in their debt. These remarks may be directed at one student whose actions have affected the entire group, such as “Thanks Ann I’ll look over it again! It is good to work as group, what one doesn’t see the other sees. It is very collaborative.” Similar remarks may be directed at all group members as in “Thank you for your encouragement. It really helps and makes you feel good when your Team Members tell you you’re doing a good job.” or “Thanks for the comments and suggestions you made in our section and the effort you’ve put into the works cited portion.”

Besides working to maintain a social balance, these students often praised each other to keep the feelings of the group positive, and thus more productive. As in other examples of *we*-focused emotions, the praise may be directed at certain individuals, like “(Rock on John and Will!)” and “Good start Melissa.” Even though it is directed at individuals, those individuals will feel better and their good feelings will contribute to the group’s feelings as a whole. On the other hand, praise may be directly given to the whole group. Examples of this include, “I commend everyone on a great team effort,” “We should all give each other a round of applause,” and “Good job all!!!”

Discussion

Considering the 137 messages posted publicly within this collaborative group, the majority of the emotional content is relational—focused on *you* or *us*. Specifically, students expressed an abundance of gratitude, apology, and praise throughout their work together. One factor contributing to this relational focus is the educational context. We are all socialized from a young age to “play well with others,” that is, to cooperate with our peers. The adult students in this graduate class were no different in their interactions with each other.

The particular course content and activities also contributed to the majority of the emotional expression being relational. This course was designed to teach graduate students about computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL). The very content of the course was devoted to teaching students about the use of computers to enable people to work well in groups. Had the course been focused on something like statistics, which does not look specifically at the dynamics of people working together, the amount of emotions serving a relational focus would probably have been less.

Furthermore, the nature of the activities that the students completed also contributed to the abundance of relational emotions. Students were engaged in writing a research paper. This group chose to distribute the research and the writing, but still needed to work together to coordinate their individual work into a cohesive whole. Had the course activities studied included a weekly personal reflection sent to the group, there would have been more individual emotional focus.

Although the majority of the emotional focus serves a relational purpose, the students in this study also expressed many individual emotions. Of the individual emotions evident in the messages, most were communicated in an indirect or implied manner rather than being directly stated. Because people find it difficult to accurately label their emotions, these students may have chosen to communicate around such labels instead of mentioning the emotion directly.

Also, the direct expression of emotion is traditionally not believed to be appropriate in an educational setting (such as Coles, 1999; Sylwester, 1994). The impact of this is seen as most of the direct expressions of emotion follow the solicitation of those expressions by a peer. In other words, it seems more appropriate for a student to respond to someone else’s question about how they are feeling than it is to offer up those emotions unsolicited. Similarly, as students strive to be strictly cognitive in their coursework they may be hiding their feelings in messages that indirectly convey their emotions.

This data show that indeed there is emotional content being communicated online and that the nature of that content is affected by the educational context. While emotions have not always had a place in the classroom, educators are beginning to see that emotional expression can be powerful for students. In the case of these students, their expression of emotion to serve a relational function assisted them in their task of working collaboratively. I agree that emotions are good for learning (e.g. Wager, 1998) and believe that in using certain learning activities, emotional expression can be increased. Through conscious planning by the instructional designer and/or the teacher, this emotional expression can be maximized in both individual and relational foci.

Implications for the Future

Through ideas like emotional intelligence, emotions are just getting noticed as holding value in learning situations. Now it is time for fields of research that have separated out the emotion to embrace it. Educators and CMC designers need to realize that the students and users they hope to reach are emotional beings and as such need their emotions considered. Further research must continue to investigate the nature of emotions as they are communicated online, but must also delve deeper to examine to what degree the nature of the communication matches the user’s intent and how the user’s emotions impact their experience in an online course and the learning that takes place.

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