The Distributed Nature of Emotion in an Online Course

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Abstract: Researchers have largely looked at emotion as though it had been captured by a snapshot and frozen as a single moment in time, unconnected to other emotional moments. This study found the connections between emotional experiences and emotional expression to be distributed among the members of a collaborative, online, graduate level course. Thus a theory of distributed emotion—among people, among structures, and across time—can be posited to describe the patterns of emotion found in the course.

Introduction

To date, emotion research has had a clear focus upon the individual (e.g. Averill, 1980; Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2000). Researchers have largely looked at emotion as though it had been captured by a snapshot and frozen as a single moment in time, unconnected to other emotional moments. This research is an attempt to get at the continuity or discontinuity that exists among our collective emotional snapshots, and, in these spaces, to consider the people and the contexts, which affect our emotions. A theory of distributed emotion, resting on the same principles as distributed cognition (e.g. Hutchins, 2000), accounts for a fuller picture of emotion among people and over time: (1) Emotion is distributed across members of social groups. (2) Emotion is coordinated between external—material or environmental—and internal structures. (3) Emotion is distributed through time. Viewing emotions through the lens of distributed emotion encompasses elements of many traditional theories of emotion, but bends them slightly and adds other elements. Distributed emotion increases the scope of these more traditional theories by including the influences of environment and time upon our emotions and by expanding the notion of socially constructed emotions to include socially shared emotions.

The Study

The specific context of this study was a collaborative, online, graduate level education course at a large public university. The course was taught online asynchronously, with four face-to-face sessions throughout the semester. The class members were all female, and out of the nine class members, eight permitted use of their public postings and five provided their private messages and consented to interviews.

I conducted a single interview with each participant, with the possibility of asking follow-up questions if needed. For those whose recollections were not clear, I provided particular messages that emerged from initial data analysis to help them reflect on specific collective emotional experiences during the course. Following the interview, participants were given the opportunity to member check my understandings of their responses.

Throughout all stages of data collection and generation, I engaged in interpretive thematic analysis. The coding scheme focused on emotions, but was data-driven and inductive, with the possibility of multiple codes assigned per posting. Each code labeled an emotional experience or perception, such as “curiosity about what others think.” It is important to note that the actual labels used were not as important as the consistency of coding. In other words, the focus of the analysis was on patterns rather than particular emotions experienced or expressed.

Findings

Various emotions were distributed among class members. For example, Priya was the only one who expressed stubbornness during the course. Other class members expressed calm throughout the course. Also, because particular individuals could be counted on to express such “trademark” emotions, others did not feel like they had to do the
same. The students soon learned that they could count on Beth to “[voice] a frustration that most of the rest of us felt, so I think we all appreciated it.” When Beth would vent, the others students would not join in. Similarly, Carrie admitted in her interview that she could have been more encouraging to her peers, but she did not need to because “some of my classmates were real good at that.” Emotions were also distributed among the roles students played in the group. Although different people inhabited these roles at different times, a similar distribution of emotions always took place. When each student served as discussion facilitator, her expressions of emotion shifted to include emotions not expressed at other times. For example, as a participant Gabriella worked to keep discussion going by often asking, “What do you think?” but when she moved into the role of facilitator, she shifted to directly encouraging discussion among students.

Students noticed emotional patterns among the class postings that were distributed over time. For example, one student noted, “When the pressure built up because of projects and deadlines, we got a little more frustrated and irritable” and “near the end [of the course] we got nostalgic and sad.” Also, particular emotions appeared only at certain times. Fear was only expressed during the planning of projects in which students would be in the roles of teacher and learner at the same time. Also, at certain times, the emotions expressed were more intense, such as more need during major projects. According to one class member, “Emotions were higher around Thanksgiving.” Similarly certain incidents emerged as more emotionally charged than others. For example, a few students expressed concern over their perception of the instructor’s presence at the same time. During such incidents the emotions became more intense, but after things played out, class members returned to their typical levels of emotion.

These emotionally charged incidents were triggered by external structures. Different tasks brought about different emotions. For example, when students worked together to develop a rubric, more appreciation for others’ work was expressed, and when students discussed their readings more appreciation for individuals’ relevant experiences was expressed. Also, students expressed more humor during icebreakers and more regret in weekly reflections. Similarly, emotions changed with the creation of subgroups and the addition of an out-group. One student remarked, “Working collaboratively and communicating with peers tends to diffuse the negative emotions and enhance the positive ones.” Others noted that they helped team members relax or were supported emotionally. At one point in the course, the students engaged in a project with groups of classroom teachers from a different city. This introduction of an out-group, and a distant one at that, increased the intensity of the emotions expressed. One student remembers: “The [project teachers] came in and . . . [e]motions were really high at that moment.” The final external structure affecting the distributed emotion was the online environment itself. In their interviews, many students cited the permanence of public postings as a reason for their emotional hesitance online. Also the students seemed to be more mindful in expressing themselves online because, as one student put it, “I wanted to be careful not to step on any toes or let anybody misunderstand what I am saying.” Another student commented, “I think part of that effort of rewording and rewriting takes away part of the anger. It’s that whole process.” As a result of this carefulness, the intensity of emotions may have been tempered.

Implications

The implications of this work may prove helpful to the different people involved in online learning. As instructional designers become more aware of how the structures that they build and organize impact the emotions of users, their designs may become more powerful. The instructors who teach online may adapt the structures and plan and facilitate courses differently with regard to theirs and their students’ emotions. Finally, the students who choose to learn online to better work within the online environments and with others in their learning. Overall, being mindful of distributed emotions may lead to smoother relationships, as individuals are better able to negotiate structures, people, and time. As a result, students may learn more effectively and work teams may reach a higher level of success, both drawing on one another for support.

References