Express Yourself: 
Exploring How Students Express Themselves in Online Learning Environments

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Abstract: Even though online learning has become more popular in recent years, it is still viewed as being cold, impersonal, and lacking the necessary social cues, specifically nonverbal cues, for students to fully express themselves online. However, our research suggests that students are using a limited set of cues in online courses. More importantly, these cues seem to provide new opportunities for students to express emotion, minimize misunderstandings, and nurture a supportive community. Our findings indicate that students are strategically using three nonverbal cues to interact, support and bond with their peers. Unfortunately, our research also discovered that some students worried that the cues were not academic and would undermine their online contributions.

Objectives
Since the early days of computer-mediated conferencing (CMC), emotion has played an important role in online courses. At first, emotion was viewed as being largely disruptive (O'Regan, 2003). Before the emergence of the web, researchers conducted some of the first experiments with asynchronous, text-based discourse. CMC environments at the time allowed students to have basic discussions with their peers. However, instructors started to discover that their academic discussions were occasionally interrupted by hostile student messages; researchers labeled this phenomenon: “flaming” (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003). Researchers explained that ‘flaming’ incidents happened because text-based interaction lacked many social cues found in face-to-face interactions, which sometimes produced misunderstandings (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003). Currently, online learners rarely experience ‘flaming.’ This is due, in part, to modern-day students being highly accustomed to web discussion boards, text messaging apps, and social media environments. Today’s learners appear to be savvier about expressing themselves online, and this presumably helps them in their online courses. However, online learning is still often referred to as boring, with cold and impersonal communication (Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994), and is frequently viewed as less emotional compared to face-to-face classes due to the lack of aural cues and visual cues that people rely on in face-to-face conversation. Furthermore, some online learners report feeling alienated and isolated due to an emotional disconnect with their beliefs and peers (Rovai and Wighting, 2005). Nevertheless, research suggests that students commonly experience and express emotions in distance education courses (Zembylas, 2008; Sherbolm, 2010).
The goal of the current research is to examine the ways students express emotion when giving or receiving peer feedback. Specifically, the following research question is posed:

- What nonverbal cues do students use in their online notes? How do students use these cues to convey emotion?

Over the past year, we conducted a study to explore this question. With this research, we hope to understand the different strategies students adopted to convey emotions online and make up for the loss of traditional visual and verbal cues.

Theoretical Framework

Our research is grounded in a social constructivist philosophy, which proposes that individual learning often has a social and cultural foundation, taking place through interaction and collaboration with others. Learners are able to create new understandings and meanings by exploring others’ ideas and knowledge along with their own beliefs and ideas (Richardson, 2003). In the case of online learning, students lack many of the traditional visual and verbal cues that are available in face-to-face settings, which can lead to ‘flaming’ or alienation.

Some students experience negative emotions of alienation and isolation because they cannot find satisfying ways to communicate with others (Zembylas, 2008). They might post a message, for example, and not receive a response – leading them to worry that they’re being ignored, or that they’ve said something objectionable. This sense of alienation is understood to be a contributing factor to the high attrition rates in distance education (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). The literature strongly suggests, that alienation hampers students’ online learning experience, weakens their sense of community, and emotionally disconnects them from their peers, thus pushing them to leave the course altogether.

Consider this, Rovai and Wighting (2005) discovered alienation, among online students, is inversely related to a sense of community and can occur in two different ways. First, if students do not feel that they belong, or have a sense of being on a collaborative endeavor, it will weaken their sense of community and cause them to feel alienated. Secondly, when learners’ personal and cultural beliefs clash with societal beliefs, they are likely to experience a weaker sense of community because they do not feel normal. This feeling causes students to make the assumption that others would reject and devalue their beliefs, if those beliefs were shared. If students do not know the necessary strategies to emotionally communicate with their peers, in order to build a bond, then students are likely to disconnect and struggle to accept others’ ideas and beliefs.

A lack of social cues, especially nonverbal cues, within online learning environments (OLE) may prevent students from fully communicating and conveying their emotional responses while giving and receiving peer feedback. For Sherblom (2010), a CMC environment often ‘reduces, modifies, and eliminates’ physical cues, which restricts social information about an individual (Sherblom, 2010). This elimination leaves others with an unclear impression, allows for biased interpretations, and less self-reflective communication, which reduces social presence. However,
Sherblom (2010) argues that people are natural communicators and will find new ways to gather information about others’ feelings. Finding information just requires more time and effort on the part of students and instructors. Similarly, Derks, Fischer, and Bos (2007) argue expressing emotions online is possible and is somewhat similar to that of face-to-face courses. However, emotions online tend to be less intense, not only because of limited social cues, but also due to a time-lag which gives people more time to think and reflect, leading to more controlled emotional reactions.

In this proposal, we explore nonverbal cues students use to help express emotion. Knowing this will allow instructors and students to better understand each other and support learning more effectively online.

**Methods and Data Sources**

This qualitative study focuses on an online graduate course taught at a major North American university. Data was collected using two sources: students’ online notes, and semi-structured interviews with students from the online course. Forty-five students signed up for the course, which took place over a twelve-week period in an online environment called Pepper. To analyze students’ online notes, a content analysis was used to help make inferences (Bryman, 2004) about the nonverbal cues students were using. However, students’ online notes only revealed the specific nonverbal cues students were using and how they were doing so. To better understand why students were using these cues, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four students from the online course. The interviews were also analyzed using the content analysis technique. The categories from the interviews and students’ online notes were compared to illustrate the nonverbal cues being used in an OLE by students to express emotion and support their learning.

**Results**

Research Question: What nonverbal cues were students using in their online notes? How did students use these cues to convey emotion?

Students’ online notes and interviews revealed three categories of nonverbal cues. These cues were: emoticons, unconventional punctuation, and the ‘Like’ button, which were used by students to emphasize tone and express emotions.

**Emoticons.** Emoticons were used by students to accompany a statement with an emotion, much in the same way that person speaking in a class might use certain facial expressions or vocal intonations while discussing an idea. Four emoticons were used consistently throughout the OLE: the smiley emoticon, the sad emoticon, the wink emoticon and the tongue emoticon. Furthermore, students used each emoticon in specific ways:

- the smiley emoticon was sometimes used when students expressed support for a similar view.
- the sad emoticon was used when students were facing a challenging task, or struggling to understand a specific concept or weekly reading.
• the wink and tongue emoticons were used to help convey the intention of humor or sarcasm in a note.

Overall, students found emoticons to be helpful in text-based communication when trying to project specific tones to others. While students demonstrated proficiency with emoticons, some expressed concern about the use of emoticons, worrying that the instructor might disapprove of them. Learners expressed feeling caught between two competing pressures: the pressure to build a collaborative learning community (which requires the expression of emotion and the engendering of trust) and the pressure to produce objective, non-emotional, academic writing.

**Unconventional punctuation.** Students often used punctuation in unconventional ways to express emotions. According to participants, repeated exclamation marks helped grab peoples’ attention, as well as express excitement or frustration for a specific idea. However again, as in the case of the emoticons, students raised concerns about what was considered “acceptable behaviour.” Ellipses were another form of punctuation used by students to convey an emotion. They reportedly used the characters “...” to indicate reflective thinking, or perhaps suggest that an idea was still under consideration. Participants acknowledged that ellipses were used to indicate to their peers that they were still pondering and grappling with an idea. Doing this allowed students to signal to the instructor, and their peers, that their ideas were still in development. This provides a means by which students can begin talking about notions that are difficult to grasp, while at the same time reducing the risk that one will be criticized or judged harshly for doing so.

**The ‘Like’ button.** Facebook created and popularized the ‘Like’ button. Usually used in social media to indicate whether a person likes, enjoys, or supports certain content, it is a simple and quick way to communicate approval. In Pepper the ‘Like’ button was added so students can “Like” each other’s notes. Our research suggests that they use the button for a wide variety of communicative purposes. For instance, students ‘Liked’ notes to:

• acknowledge peers who shared personal experiences with the class;
• indicate appreciation for notes that reflect their own perspectives;
• thank students who shared or produced particularly valuable resources;
• show support for students who discuss a personal struggle;
• recognize efforts to refer to / synthesize other people’s ideas, or class readings;
• show appreciation for someone who responds to his or her note.

All participants indicated that the ‘Like’ button was used to express support for their peers and enjoyment for certain content. Students also admitted to using the ‘Like’ button often, perhaps because the ‘Like’ button held strong and similar meanings for all online learners. Many participants also expressed that they enjoyed receiving ‘Likes’ because it made them feel good about their contributions.
Scholarly Significance

In a face-to-face classroom, instructors have an opportunity to notice and interpret social cues, modify instruction where necessary, and provide timely feedback to students (Berenson, Boyles, Weaver, 2008). This practice is trickier in an OLE, simply because there are fewer cues. Unless instructors know the specific cues that students’ use, and how they use them, it is difficult to modify instruction and provide feedback to students (Rovai and Wighting, 2005). Therefore, it is important to understand how students strategically manipulate the remaining cues to express emotion in an OLE because it can help educators better understand “how emotions shape student engagement and learning” (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Perkun, 2011, p.1).

Our research suggests that the nonverbal cues used by some online students are effective in terms of helping them express themselves, such as their beliefs and ideas, more accurately to others. These cues also provide students with new avenues to support, understand, and engage with their peers more effectively. Efforts to curtail the use of these tools may, in fact, inhibit community building and may reduce the clarity of student communication. Additionally, the literature suggests that when emotional expression is discouraged in an OLE it could make communication boring, cold and impersonal (Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994). Therefore, we argue it is important for instructors to encourage the use of these cues because they help foster trust, safety, and comfort among online learners, which strengthens community (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Nonverbal cues provide new meaning to the way students’ express themselves, support their peers, and explore others’ ideas and beliefs online. These cues also have unrealized potential of helping us further understand how emotion impacts the ways students engage with others and learn online. More importantly, the continuing conundrum of culture, language, and heritage in education puts pressure on instructors to make sure students are able to fully express themselves without fear of alienation or isolation in an OLE. This involves addressing the appropriateness of these cues in online academic discussions. Using nonverbal cues in an OLE does come with challenges, but for students’ cues are organic; they are necessary for enriching online communication by helping to prevent any flaming, misinterpretation, and alienation.
References


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