

Using VLEs to Support Emotional Intelligence: A Secondary School Perspective

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Abstract

This research study brings to light different approaches by which a virtual learning environment (VLE) may be adopted in order to develop students' emotional intelligence. Drawing upon data obtained from questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions, I argue, that the strategic adoption of VLE tools for use in discussion forums, homework support and feedback amongst others, can help in boosting secondary school students' self-confidence and motivation to use VLE resources. Furthermore, the argument is made, that developing students' emotional intelligence through the use of online learning tools can lead to the attainment of emotionally intelligent face-to-face classroom environments and hence positive learning outcomes.

Keywords

virtual learning environment, emotional intelligence, secondary schools

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings of a research study that examined the roles that virtual learning environments (VLEs) can play in supporting and developing the emotional intelligence of secondary school students. It considers the nature of the VLE being used in a secondary school in London and identifies which VLE tools are popularly used in the school as well as how those tools may be depended upon to develop students' emotional intelligence. The school within which the study was undertaken has a student population of about 600, has 35 teachers and 5 teaching assistants (TAs), and has been using the 'Fronter' VLE for the last three years.

The paper is organised as follows: First, a brief review of the literature on emotional intelligence and VLEs is provided in order to provide a contextual understanding of the research study. Next, the methods of data collection used (questionnaires, interviews and focused group discussions) and findings are discussed. The paper concludes with directions for future research.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SCHOOLS

According to Colman's (2009) dictionary of psychology, the term emotional intelligence appeared sporadically in the psychological literature during the 1970s and 1980s. However, it was in 1990 that the concept was formally defined by Salovey and Mayer as 'the ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behaviour' (p. 187).

In schools, emotional intelligence has been found to be useful for predicting academic success (Parker et al., 2004). A research conducted by Petrides Frederickson, and Furnham (2004) indicated that students with high levels of emotional intelligence are less likely to have unauthorised absences and are also less likely to be

excluded from school. Moreover, Goleman (2008) asserts that an evaluation of over 233, 000 students, indicated that students receiving lessons in social and emotional skills improved on every measure of positive behaviour, such as classroom discipline, attendance, and liking school. Goleman (2008) adds that 'teaching students skills like empathy, self-awareness and how to manage emotions make them better learners' (p. 8). Therefore, he argues for social and emotional lessons to be embedded in the educational process. This way, schools will become caring communities, where 'students feel respected, cared about, and bonded to classmates' (Goleman, 1995, p. 280).

Undoubtedly, emotions like anger, happiness and fear can influence how people think, make decisions and perform tasks (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey 2011). This means that emotions can impact upon our cognitive abilities. Therefore, it is important for teachers to recognise the important role of emotional intelligence if they want to enable their students to succeed in maximising their academic potentials.

VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The last few years has witnessed the widespread adoption of VLE technologies in schools. These technologies, according to Stiles (2007), have been designed to support learning by facilitating teachers in the management of educational courses for their students. In academic institutions where the adoption of such technologies have been successful, they have been seen as providing students with learning experiences that transcend the boundaries of brick and mortar schools (John & Wheeler, 2008).

The VLE's potential to transform the way we educate and are educated appears to be enormous; considering the benefits that have been associated with it in the literature. Polisca (2006) for example, has suggested that a VLE may be depended upon to improve the quality of students' independent work, as well as their learning motivation. Similarly, Leese (2009) has argued that a VLE may be used to encourage students to engage in out of class activities between taught sessions. VLEs also have the potential to improve communication between teachers and parents of their pupils; offer opportunities for personalised learning; discussion and support with students on line; assessment and monitoring of students' progress (John & Wheeler, 2008).

Unfortunately, a review of the extant literature indicates that most research studies into the adoption and use of VLEs have been undertaken within the further and higher education sectors, whereas very few of such research studies have been conducted from the perspective of secondary schools or below (Oliver, Osborne, & Brady, 2009). Furthermore, it appears that the relationship between emotional intelligence and VLEs has not been explored. For this reason, the influential roles that VLEs can play in supporting and developing the emotional intelligence of secondary school students have also not been examined. This research study attempted to address such issues by posing the question: 'How should VLEs be used in order to support the emotional intelligence of secondary school students?'

QUESTIONNAIRES

Two sets of questionnaires were used in this study. The first was used to solicit teachers' and TAs' views about emotional intelligence in the classroom and how emotional intelligence may be adapted within VLEs designed for secondary school students. The second questionnaire inquired about students' experiences in relation to the school's VLE. Students were asked which tools they have had opportunities to use, what things about the VLE motivates or encourages them to use it as well as which aspects of the VLE frustrates them. Both questionnaires were anonymously administered via online survey tools.

Staff questionnaire

Open-ended questions were used in the staff questionnaire with the view of accessing information without having to provide respondents with much prompting. This questionnaire required that respondents indicated their views about emotional intelligence, by first of all, indicating what the term means to them. Also, respondents were asked about their opinions in relation to emotional intelligence within face-to-face classroom settings and how VLEs may be used to support emotional intelligence.

From their responses, it was possible to establish that most respondents understand the term emotional intelligence and are knowledgeable about its relevance within the classroom environment. For example, a respondent stated that in their opinion emotional intelligence means 'having the perception to identify with, be aware of and being able to deal with others' emotional needs'. Another respondent indicated that emotional intelligence refers to our ability to be 'aware of people's thoughts and feelings and being able to take into account how these are likely to affect behaviour'.

Only one colleague suggested that they were unsure of what the term emotional intelligence means. That respondent stated 'not really sure but I imagine that this has to do with feelings and the state of a person's wellbeing and the impact that this has on the classroom and performance'. Undoubtedly, this view falls short of the definitions of emotional intelligence given by experts in the field such as Goleman (1998) and Salovey and Mayer (1990). Nevertheless, it is clear that the respondent had at least, a vague idea of what the term means and that they were likely to be able to be critical about the role of emotional intelligence within the classroom.

All respondents indicated that emotional intelligence is necessary for achieving positive learning outcomes. One respondent for example, suggested that in the classroom the emotionally intelligent teacher has the ability to develop a positive learning environment, promote happiness, self-esteem and develop confidence amongst students. Other respondents stated that emotional intelligence:

- Can be depended upon to create an environment in which students feel secure enough to make good progress and want to learn.
- Engenders empathy, comfort and trust so that everyone is able to learn in a positive environment and do their best.
- Will enable us to deal with events in our lives that make us unhappy or angry so that these emotions do not cloud our judgement or ability to take part in teaching and learning.

One of the respondents emphasised the important role of emotional intelligence in relation to teaching and learning by asserting that:

You need to be a balanced, calm teacher who can empathise with your students. There is little point in having a teacher who has subject knowledge but cannot relate to children and their needs. One must be able to take a holistic view of children when teaching them.

In other words, although it is important to have excellent subject knowledge, it is equally important to maintain an emotionally balanced classroom environment. For, it is then that students will begin to enjoy their learning experiences and thereby more readily open up to any factors that may be inhibiting their progress.

When asked about how a VLE may be used to support emotional intelligence, one respondent stated that:

A well monitored VLE forum can provide a good 'practice' for users in relation to staying on-topic in relation to a particular discussion, and realise that their own enthusiasm for a given idea or thought or belief does not mean that a) they can express it regardless of the current conversation and b) impose it on others. This could help them better recognise when they DO such behaviour and can help them better self-monitor in future.

Indeed, the view expressed by this respondent (points a and b) underpins expected classroom practice within the school. For, students are expected to work co-operatively with others and are encouraged to recognise and respect social differences and similarities. Hence, being able to extend such practices to a VLE will mean that students are constantly being reminded of the acceptable codes of conduct within the classroom. In effect, this has the potential to increase their self-awareness and relationship management skills.

Student questionnaire

211 students responded to the questionnaire. Of this, 49 claimed to visit every day, 138 claimed to visit at least once a week and 20 at least once a month. The respondents indicated also, that they have had the opportunity to work within the VLE in nearly all the subjects they study. They suggested that amongst the VLE tools currently in use, the homework diary, test, and hand-in tools are the most popular. Other opinions are shown in the diagrams below:

Q: Which tools have you had opportunities to use within Fronter?

Alternative	Percentage	
Homework Diary	86.3%	
Voting	28%	
Hand-in	80.1%	
Forums	37.9%	
Tests	66.8%	
Messages	25.6%	

Q: It will be useful if teachers put their PowerPoint presentation for lessons on Fronter.

Alternative	Percentage	
Strongly Agree	61.1%	
Agree	28.4%	
Disagree	6.6%	
Strongly Disagree	1.9%	

Q: It will be useful if teachers put VIDEO resources on Fronter.

Alternative	Percentage	
Strongly Agree	48.3%	
Agree	38.9%	
Disagree	7.1%	
Strongly Disagree	2.4%	

In subsequent questions, respondents indicated how the use of videos, forums and feedback impacts upon their confidence, self-esteem and ability to collaborate as follows:

Topic-related videos posted on Fronter :

Alternative	Percentage	
Helps to build my confidence about a topic	74.7%	
Enables me to value others' opinions	14.7%	
Encourages me to contribute to class discussions	37.9%	
Convinces me that I know everything about a topic	31.6%	
Encourages me not to listen in class	2.1%	
Helps me to support others	24.2%	
None of the above	10.5%	

The forums on Fronter

Alternative	Percentage	
Makes me feel valued	17.9%	
Makes me think about what I want to write	32.6%	
Enables me to get support	41.1%	
Enables me to discuss work with my peers	58.9%	
Helps me to understand other's opinions	50.5%	
Enables me to support others	34.7%	
None of the above	15.8%	

Feedback given by my peers:

Alternative	Percentage	
Helps to boost my self-esteem	44.2%	
Encourages me to share my opinions	47.4%	
Makes me want to help a bit more	34.7%	
Encourages me to listen carefully to other's opinions	53.7%	
Encourages me to work harder	57.9%	
None of these	9.5%	

Asked about how they think the VLE may be improved, the students' general opinion was that the VLE should be updated regularly, and more opportunities created for collaboration and support.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 teachers in order to further explore their understanding of emotional intelligence and also, their views about how VLEs may be used to support emotional intelligence within the classroom. Of the 8 interviewees, there were 4 senior leaders, 2 middle leaders and 2 main scale classroom teachers. The senior leaders were chosen because they had completed or were considering the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) - a programme which has emotional intelligence as its core. The others were chosen for their enthusiasm for using the VLE and also for representativeness. Each interviewee was interviewed in their own classroom or office and was asked the following key questions:

- What the term emotional intelligence meant to them.
- Whether or not they considered emotional intelligence as being important in teaching and learning.
- Their views about what emotionally intelligent classrooms look like.
- Their views about how VLEs may be used to support emotional intelligence.

All responses were subsequently transcribed, coded and analysed thematically. It emerged from the interviews that teachers perceive emotional intelligence as being paramount to successful teaching and learning. As with the questionnaire responses, the interviewees expressed the opinion that emotional intelligence encourages calmness when dealing with other people; promotes a person's ability to listen carefully, and their ability to relate with others.

According to an interviewee, 'schools are complex places'. This is especially so in multicultural cities like London where the role of the teacher involves having to deal with 'lots of different personalities, different expectations from parents, students, school leaders and government'. In addition, teachers are expected to deal with issues surrounding ethnicity, equality, spirituality and sexuality. Hence, that interviewee asserted that 'it is impossible to cope within education if one is not emotionally intelligent'.

Furthermore, the general opinion was that emotionally intelligent classrooms are vibrant, interactive and accessible. They look or feel flexible; are productive environments where students feel safe and are able to take risks; are environments within which collaboration thrives, and where every action is underpinned by respect for students as well as staff. Another interviewee remarked that emotionally intelligent lessons are those 'where students are maturely discussing and learning about the knowledge that they should be learning'.

Focus groups

Three focus group meetings were held. In the initial meeting, 6 teachers who are regular users of the VLE met for an hour to discuss how the VLE may be used to support emotional intelligence. The second meeting comprised 3 Information and communication technology (ICT) teachers, whilst the last meeting comprised all teachers and TAs in the school discussing in groups of 4 or 5. The second and third sessions lasted 30 minutes.

The discussions that followed suggested that the strategic adoption of VLE tools for communication in forums, videos and feedback can help in developing students' emotional intelligence whilst promoting active participation in classroom dialogue and positive attitudes towards learning. With regards to the use of videos and PowerPoint presentations for example, it emerged that when teachers upload such resources about a topic to be studied prior to lessons, they offer their students opportunities to develop self-confidence and the confidence to contribute to classroom dialogue.

This is because students are able to access the resources several times. Therefore, they have the opportunity to repeat the aspects that they did not initially understand. Consequently, they have more time to consider their opinions (developing self-awareness) and therefore are more likely to be prepared for subsequent classroom discussions. On the other hand, one can argue, that the availability of such resources can lead to students becoming convinced, that they know everything about the topic being studied and therefore, do not need to take part. Although this view was not expressed by respondents, it is important for teachers to guard against such situations by ensuring that videos are designed to offer guidance and support or to encourage reflection as opposed to teaching a whole concept.

Even so, there are more positives to be derived from using such resources. As noted by one group, the use of video resources offers to students, a multi-sensory access to learning materials, thereby helping to promote inclusiveness and motivation for learning. Another group asserted that apart from promoting independent learning, there is the added benefit of in-depth classroom discussions. This is because every student would have had at least, a basic awareness of the topic to be discussed in class having watched a related video prior to the lesson. They argued that 'classroom time will be maximised and discussions will flow quicker'. In addition,

each student is more likely to be listened to carefully as everyone would have an opinion about the topic being discussed.

Consequently, a positive classroom ambience is likely to be developed, as students 'would be able to see themselves as part of a team of equals'. Mutual respect will thus flourish and so will collaborations. On the other hand, anger, frustration and feelings of isolation resulting from the inability to access what is being studied will be minimised. In effect, the classroom becomes an emotionally intelligent one, where students will be 'maturely discussing and learning about the knowledge that they should be learning'. Further, the video resources can be re-used as revision tools. And where the classroom teacher is featured in the video, such resources may help in creating a seamless learning experience which may help in developing rapport between teacher and students.

Generally, teachers were also of the opinion that VLE forums can help to develop self awareness, empathy and relationship management skills amongst students. This is because the forum allows students to post questions they may have about their homework or aspects of a video that they did not understand. Other students are then able to share their knowledge and experiences with the group. In order not to offend their peers, students are likely to reflect upon the questions or responses that they post to the forum. This in turn would help them in developing self-awareness and self-regulation skills. Bearing in mind that they may be the ones posting questions in future, they learn to become empathetic and so develop relationship management abilities. Knowing that they can count on each other also means that students learn to trust each other's opinions.

Such experiences may transcend into face-to-face situations and can lead to the development of emotionally intelligent classroom environments. Nevertheless, success in using forums to support emotional intelligence may require that teachers spend more time on the forums themselves in order to monitor content and to offer support. This appeared to be an issue for some.

Another focus group mentioned the use of reflective journals as a means of developing students' emotional intelligence. According to them, students should be encouraged to keep a log of their emotional experiences when they work within a VLE. This may include emotions they experience when they are offered help with their work online; discussions in online forums; occasions they have been motivated to work within the VLE as well as occasions when they have been frustrated with the VLE. By keeping such a journal and referring to it, they added that students will become more aware of their own emotions and hence will be able to adapt their behaviour more appropriately when they are around other people. Furthermore, a colleague suggested that forums and tools for leaving feedback (such as test and hand-in tools) should be relied upon to give students more opportunities to respond in an affirmative manner to others' comments.

Additionally, with test tools, it is possible to provide automated diagnostic comments and automated showing of the correct answer and reasoning (Gipps, 2005). This means that there are immediate opportunities for students to learn from their mistakes. As a result, they are more likely to become successful learners. Their confidence and self-esteem thus grows and there is an increased possibility of them carrying positive emotions about their learning experiences into subsequent lessons (Russell, Elton, Swinglehurst & Greenhalgh, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Commonly used expressions such as 'do not let your emotions get in the way', indicate that emotions can disrupt our ability to make intelligent decisions. As non-cognitive processes, emotions have often been viewed as 'disrupting the mind and preventing it from functioning objectively and rationally' (Gillies, 2011, p. 186). The theory of emotional intelligence however, enables us to understand, that emotions can make cognitive processes adaptive, and that individuals can think rationally

about their emotions (Brackett et al., 2011). Thus, if well managed, emotions have the capacity to energise students' in their thinking and thereby facilitate their learning process (Ellis, Moore, Varner, Ottaway, & Becker, 1997).

This study has brought to light different approaches by which a VLE may be used in order to help develop students' emotional intelligence. It argues that the strategic adoption of VLE tools for use in discussion forums, homework, feedback and support amongst others, can help in boosting students' self-confidence and motivation to use VLE resources. This is because, using the VLE tools in the suggested ways can encourage reflective and collaborative practices, trust, and new opportunities for providing or accessing support. Consequently, it is argued that students will be more able to develop self-awareness and self-regulation skills as well as the ability to collaborate effectively with their peers when they work within face-to-face classroom settings or online. However, it must be emphasised, that without the support of teachers who are enthusiastic and motivated in using the VLE tools, developing emotional intelligence via VLEs will be difficult to achieve and the efforts of others can be undermined. Future research studies can specifically examine the impacts of using the proposed VLE tools on students' emotional intelligence in order to generate causal links.

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Biography



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