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The emotional side of e-learning: the role of emotions in online courses

Emotional involvement in online courses: why it is important and how to recognise it in learners

Joy, fear, trust and surprise. Every moment of our lives is linked to an **emotion**, which enables us to store pleasant memories or unpleasant situations in our memory. Through emotions we are able to communicate conditions of danger, discomfort or safety to others or ourselves. Not only that. They are also crucial in **learning**, because they help internalise concepts and enhance the learning experience. In addition to influencing academic performance, emotions can also affect the way learners perceive their own education and this also applies to distance learning. Therefore, when developing and offering online courses, it is important to take the emotional side of e-learning into account.

Why use emotions in e-learning?

Emotions are a fundamental component of the process of any kind of learning, whether it takes place in the classroom, with face-to-face lessons between students and teacher, or using a computer, tablet or smartphone as a vehicle for teaching. Despite the fact that the world of emotions seems distant from that of education, especially when it takes place online, emotionally involving the student, whether in school education or learning in the workplace, is crucial.

This is because human **memory** is stimulated by emotional connections, which allow us to remember certain concepts or situations by linking them to an emotion. Therefore, also in the case of e-learning, learning will be more successful if it is able to make users develop positive emotions, enabling them to feel involved in the lessons. Furthermore, as specified in an eLearning Industry article, this emotional approach also directly influences "the level of learning and, therefore, the participants' ability to put into practice or use the information received".

Highlighting the **role of emotions in e-learning courses** was recently a study, entitled The emotional side of e-learning among nursing students: The role of the affective correlates on e-learning satisfaction and conducted by Italian, French and Spanish researchers, who investigated the role played by positive and negative emotions in the relationship between learning and satisfaction. In particular, the researchers applied their theoretical model to a sample of 353 university students from the Faculty of Nursing at an Italian institution. The results, the researchers explained, "showed that students' e-learning experience correlated with both positive and negative emotions in different ways. This also influenced the satisfaction related to participation in the distance learning course. According to the researchers, there is a 'complex interaction' between perceptions during an e-learning course, 'affective correlates and satisfaction with distance learning'.

Linking information learnt during an in-presence lecture or an online course to a positive feeling is helpful because it improves recall of that concept. Therefore, even in e-learning, the use of the emotional aspect is important for student engagement and satisfaction, which will enable them to continue to connect, lesson after lesson.

The five indications of poor emotional involvement

Involving students emotionally in an online course is, therefore, crucial. But it is not an easy task. The risk is that the interest of the students is not captured by the lesson topics and, sometimes without even realising it, the author of the course fails to enthuse the users, who may decide not to continue it. So how can we tell if those who are following the lesson are also emotionally involved and, therefore, inclined to continue and experience the usefulness of the teachings and their learning? Here are the five signs, collected in the eLearning Industry article, that may indicate a lack of emotional connection during an online training course:

1. **Inaccurate answers**. If, during exercises, assessment tests or assigned tasks, the student gives wrong, superficial or inaccurate answers, then it is likely that he or she has absorbed the information provided during the course superficially.

This deficiency may be caused precisely by a lack of interest, resulting from little or no emotional connection to the subject matter. The teacher can analyse the results of the users' online activity, not only to identify the course topics in which the students had the most difficulty and therefore needed further study, but also to assess the possible lack of emotional connection. Furthermore, by analysing the failure rates, it is possible to understand whether or not the learning difficulty and therefore the lack of emotional connection is widespread among the students of the e-learning course.

2. **Yawning**, lost looks and signs of impatience. These are signs that can be detected either during a synchronous course, i.e. when teacher and students connect at the same time to conduct or participate in the lesson, or by talking to the student afterwards about his or her views on the course. In order to understand whether the user is emotionally involved and thus interested in the course, it is crucial to observe facial expressions, which often reveal what is not being said. Signs of disinterest and lack of attention may be shown in the form of yawning, looking away (e.g. at the mobile phone or other open screens on the computer), rolling eyes. Facial observation is more difficult if participants follow the lessons from home. In this case, it is possible to talk about the course afterwards and observe the users' behaviour and responses to try to understand their emotional involvement.
3. **Lack of depth**. If participants access the training material without going into depth, but only doing the bare minimum of what is required, it is possible that they have failed to emotionally engage with the e-learning. To highlight the presence or absence of this, a story can be used: after having told or read it, the learners can be asked to tell it again. In this way, it is possible to see whether it has aroused emotions.
4. **No reference to the course** in other contexts If users do not talk about the e-learning course they are taking, it probably means that the experience did not leave a particularly noticeable mark. Thus, the lessons are not engaging the learners' emotions. The lack of an exchange of opinions about the course is therefore never a good sign.
5. **Lack of participation**. This sign can be assessed quite clearly in a synchronous course: in this case, if the learners only participate in the minimum number of lectures, sticking to the bare minimum, then it means that their interest in the lectures is not high and therefore they probably did not feel emotionally involved. In an asynchronous course, it is more difficult to realise the lack of participation, but it is possible to examine the reports of the platforms hosting the e-learning courses to see where the students' attention lingered the most and the longest.

In general, to understand the reason for the lack of stimulation of emotions, it is possible to analyse wrong answers, scores, interactions. It is also crucial to ask whether, in the development of the course, something was left out or an inappropriate emotion was taken into account for that particular topic.

What to do to correct the course?

There are several signs that may indicate a lack of emotional involvement of learners during e-learning. But what to do if one realises that the course is not going in the desired direction? In the case of synchronous learning, the teacher can correct the course on the fly during his or her lesson, while if users connect at different times for learning, the necessary elements can be introduced in future training projects.
If the teacher realises that the lesson he or she is giving does not engage the pupils following him or her online, he or she can:

- Introduce a pause;
- Tell an anecdote;
- Ask questions to engage the students.

Other **solutions**, which can also be adopted in cases of asynchronous online courses, are the following:

- Correlate the **right emotion** according to the topic. If the course creator intends to motivate students, it will be necessary to appeal to positive emotions, such as joy, confidence, satisfaction.
- Use **humour, colours and music** to create a pleasant environment, which can increase the recall of the learned topics. This happens because our mind links different situations to the emotions perceived at the time they were experienced. In this sense, recalling a pleasant emotion is easier than recalling a sad, fearful or distressing experience.
- **Telling a story** or hypothesising a real-life scenario can be helpful in bringing to light specific emotions that were intended to be highlighted in the story. The story can help the student empathise with the characters, who should be thought of in a way that evokes the objectives or topics to be covered during the course.
- Use the **element of surprise**, which may consist of an image, a video, a game, that can attract the participants' attention and intrigue them, making the course more interactive and unexpected.

- Use evocative images, which can help the student's emotional connection. Images are very useful because they evoke different feelings: it is necessary to find positive ones in order to capture the user's attention and ensure learning of the course topics.

Including emotional content in an online course is very useful to be able to capture the student's attention and create the memory of a pleasant moment that, besides facilitating learning, will lead the students to continue the lessons, in order to search for that positive feeling.

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