The Online Empathy Training Tool (OLETT)

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Abstract

The Online Empathy Training Tool (OLETT) is a three stage simulation activity designed to enable tutors to test their ability to accurately identify emotional subtexts and implicit affective dimensions to emails that might be routinely received by tutors from students and colleagues. It is one of the activities comprising the Empathy Unit which forms part of the e-Educator Module featured in this Special Issue. The first stage of the activity involves asking participants to choose adjectives which best describe the underlying feelings contained within 27 fictitious, but true-to-life emails. This activity is time-constrained to simulate the real-world, real-time pressures experienced by on and off line tutors in higher education (HE). Following completion of the first stage of the activity, participants are invited to compose empathic replies to three of the emails in the light of their interpretations of the underlying feelings. These compositions are then posted for feedback and comment by other members of their learning group. The design methodology for OLETT is discussed and the outcomes of the pilot evaluations to date described.

Abstrak

Alat Latihan Empati Atas Talian (ALEAT) ialah aktiviti simulasi tiga paras yang direka bentuk untuk membolehkan tutor menguji kebolehan mereka untuk mengenal pasti dengan tepat emosi dan dimensi efektif melalui emel yang diperolehi dari semasa ke semasa daripada pelajar dan juga rakan. Ianya merupakan salah satu aktiviti yang mengandungi unit empati yang membentuk sebahagian daripada modul e-Educator yang diketengahkan dalam isu khas jurnal ini. Paras pertama aktiviti melibatkan pertanyaan kepada peserta untuk memilih penjodoh yang paling baik bagi menjelaskan perasaan yang terkandung di dalam 27 emel yang sengaja disediakan yang berbentuk kehidupan sebenar. Aktiviti yang mengambil masa ini menstimulasikan masalah dunia sebenar dan tekanan dalam masa sebenar yang dialami oleh tutor semasa atas talian dan semasa bukan atas talian dalam pengajian tinggi. Selepas melengkapkan aktiviti paras pertama, peserta-peserta dijemput untuk menghasilkan jawapan berempati kepada tiga emel

dengan mengambil kira interpretasi perasaan yang terkandung di dalamnya. Penghasilan jawapan ini kemudiannya dikemukakan untuk mendapat maklum balas dan komen oleh ahli-ahli lain di dalam kumpulan pembelajaran mereka. Reka bentuk metodologi untuk ALEAT dibincangkan dan dapatan daripada penilaian rintis dijelaskan.

Background

The context for this article is the e-Educator project within the e-learning International Sino-UK programme funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. This involved collaboration between The University of Nottingham, UK and Beijing Foreign Studies University, China to develop a module for training tutors of online learners − one that could be adapted for use in a variety of contexts. The module was piloted at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. A fully functional demonstrator is provided as part of the e-Educator project case study on the eChina-UK programme website www.echinauk.org. This article appears in the second of two Special Issue of the Malaysian Journal of Distance Education that provides a comprehensive overview of this project.

Introduction

This article describes the design and initial evaluation of an exercise, the Online Empathy Training Tool (OLETT) which sets out to improve higher education (HE) tutors' ability to read with empathic awareness and accuracy the emotional subtexts contained within text-based online interactions. Emails as the modality for text-based interaction was chosen because of its widespread use as a communication tool in HE. There is also a strong perception amongst email users in HE that the sheer volume of email traffic from colleagues and students poses emotional as well as organisational challenges to employee perceptions of well-being. The OLETT activity was intended to provide a professional development tool which might support tutors in their task of developing, maintaining and promoting interpersonal and intergroup relationships. It is one of four activities forming part of a unit on Empathy, embedded within the e-Educator module, Hall (2008). The ability to understand the thoughts

and feelings of others and to respond appropriately is one indicator of empathy. However, much of the theory of empathic understanding, appreciation and responding has concentrated on face-to-face verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. OLETT was specifically designed to direct attention and research questions into the process of extending empathy into virtual communication sites. A further indicator of empathy might then be the competence with which a tutor frames or composes text (here in email form) in the light of understanding and appreciation of the feelings of the writer or sender.

The unit on Empathy consists of four sections:

1. The first and final activity is a pre- and post test of a Self-assessment Questionnaire or Rating Scale which invites participants to evaluate the extent to which they are empathic in their personal and professional lives, both on and off line.

2. A case study entitled, 'Wu Ding, a tutor in overload'. Firstly participants listen to the case history narrative of a Chinese online HE tutor. Wu Ding's subsequent interaction with his counsellor serves as a vehicle for the learner to test their empathic appreciation of Wu Ding's situation by imagining and then composing his responses to the counsellor's questions and probes.

3. The Online Empathy Training Tool (OLETT) which is the focus of this article.

4. The 'post test' completion of the Self-assessment Questionnaire or Rating Scale, which is used to provide the learner with an indication of the extent to which their views and behaviour in relation to their empathy competence has changed as a result of completing the earlier activities in the Unit.

Writers refer to the importance of empathy in online learning (Preece, 2000) and for rules for communication or 'netiquette' (Shea, 1994) within an online group. However, to date there appears to be no training materials designed specifically for online tutors in the area of developing empathy in online communications. The Empathy Unit in the e-Educator Module

specifically addresses this gap in training and tutors are asked to reflect on and practice empathic skills through experiential, interactive activities. Empathy is a widely used term but a poorly understood concept. A detailed discussion of empathy in relation to social constructionist notions of e-learning is provided by Hall (2008) in an earlier article in this Special Issue. Empathy was defined as an umbrella or superordinate construct which embraced four subordinate domains or subcomponents:

- *empathic understanding*: having an understanding and appreciation of the other person's experience and being able to perceive the world as they perceive it;
- *empathic behaviours*: verbal and non-verbal behaviours which demonstrate an understanding of the other person;
- *empathic responding*: the ability to respond in a way which is supportive to the other person and demonstrates an understanding of how they might feel about situations they find themselves in;
- *synchronous empathic experiencing*: the ability to feel another's feelings as if you were experiencing them yourself.

Empathy as a feature of social and emotional intelligence requires a degree of skill in face-to-face situations and psychotherapeutic professionals e.g. counsellors, are expected to undergo extensive and rigorous training in this area (Egan, 2007) in addition to a theoretical knowledge base. In online learning, particularly when the majority of the communication may be virtual or text-based as in emails, the difficulties of reading text empathically are increased because many of the cues from the other person which we might normally respond to, such as visual cues, tone of voice and bodily tension are missing. Recently brain science (Goleman, 2006) has identified cells in the brain called mirror cells which mediate the process of empathy in face-to-face interactions. These cells appear to trigger the same feelings, although not of the same intensity, being experienced by another person when you are in their presence and by paying attention to this information the observer can gain an understanding of what the other person is feeling. This process increases the probability or likelihood of making an appropriate empathic verbal or nonverbal response to the other person. Focussing attention on these feelings in a training setting can heighten this awareness and the quality of empathy in responses can be improved through practice. In other words

we can learn to polish our mirror cells. If the communication is electronic as is the case with emails, the mirror cells can still be involved, but will be mediated by the imagination of the recipient rather than via direct experience of the sender.

OLETT was designed to specifically address the issue of understanding the feelings and underlying messages embedded in email communications and how appropriate responses can be composed taking account of these more subtle or hidden aspects of the process. Email, as we argued earlier, was chosen as the locus of the exercise as it is probably the most common form of communication between tutor and student in online courses around the world, particularly where individual tutors may be responsible for large groups of students and are under pressure to cope with the volume of emails that arrive daily. Simply looking at the list of unopened emails in the inbox can be intimidating and individual replies are usually worked through at speed. In addition no doubt we have all had the experience of what we might term the 'heartsink email, that is the heart literally sinks when we see the name of the sender and the subject of the message. Given this time and emotional pressure it is easy to respond to emails, whether from colleagues or students, in a hasty, unthought-through manner which may give rise to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Replies may be monosyllabic or simply written in the strap line of the email, ignoring or paying scant attention to the emotional undertones of the sender's communication or their cultural etiquette, protocols or expectations. Responses lacking in empathic engagement are more likely to occur when the tutor is experiencing stress or pressure. The same applies to tutors' involvement in bulletin boards and discussion forums, and exercises using the same general principles as OLETT could be designed around these activities.

The original design and preliminary evaluation of OLETT involved three groups of HE tutors. Firstly, the authors and two colleagues from Beijing Foreign Studies University engaged in the initial writing and design process. Secondly, a group of eight HE tutors from a range of cultures who took on the role of independent expert raters confirming or disconfirming the underlying feelings assumed by the authors of OLETT in the initial writing process. These tutors were all qualified counsellors and would be routinely involved in the theory and practice of empathy.

Thirdly, a pilot group of six Malaysian HE tutors, who worked through and evaluated the e-Educator module including the Empathy Unit including the OLETT.

Design Methodology

OLETT was designed firstly to simulate an online tutor reading through an inbox of 60 emails at speed and participants are asked to identify the underlying emotions and covert feelings and messages embedded in the emails which might not be revealed immediately in the text itself. Secondly, participants are required to compose empathic responses taking account of their readings of these emotional subtexts to three of the emails, which are automatically provided for them. These responses are posted to a discussion forum thread. Thirdly, they are provided with feedback from their learning group on a further thread regarding the skill and degree of accuracy with which they had responded.

First stage

The initial development stage involved generating a substantial number of emails which resembled those that might be received by on and offline tutors from students and also colleagues. Emails were authored which mirrored our own experience and were designed to have a 'ring of truth' to them in both eastern and western cultures. In this development phase, a learning technologist designed an email inbox which was to resemble Groupwise or Outlook facades and which contained 60 emails in the inbox. A demonstration screen provided an example and presented participants with a sample inbox with an opened email and instructions for the exercise (Figure 1). The bottom half of the screen displayed four adjectives offered as possible descriptors of the underlying feeling embedded in the email text. Participants were asked to decide which adjective is the 'best description' of the underlying feeling; then the 'next best description' and finally the 'worst description'. They are required to make a choice of adjective before the programme allows them to proceed to the next email. The bottom right hand corner of the screen displays a timer which is programmed to begin as soon as the first email is opened. The participants are warned that they have to complete the exercise within thirty minutes, after which they will be timed out and have to begin again.

In practice 30 minutes is ample time to complete the exercise as shown by the initial user trials with the expert raters and the Malaysian pilot group, all of whom completed in good time. However, the presence of the clock ticking away provides a sense of urgency and encourages working through the items at speed, simulating the everyday time constraints and pressures experienced by tutors. The screen with the initial example is shown in Figure 1.

From	To	Subject
Li, Hi Fong	Dr Hammeesh	Help please
Rebecca Ng	Professor McGreene	Supervisor
Angela Topps	Professor Gu	Book request?
Neil Prosser	Dr Li Fang	Feedback?

Dear prof McGreene
I would like to give you the honour of supervising my dissertation f2f. I would be free to meet with you at either 10.00 am on Tuesday or 3.00 pm on Thursday when I will be on the campus. I will need an hour and half for this first meeting.

Rebecca Ng
(MSc student)

	Best description	Next best description	Worst description
confident	●	○	○
modest	○	○	●
direct	○	●	○

Submit   Pause

29:19

Figure 1   Initial email example in OLETT

The emails, adjectives and the ranking categories 'best', 'next best' and 'worst' were authored by the writers of this article who are both experienced HE tutors and researchers specialising in the areas of human relations and counselling. A group of volunteer expert independent raters were asked to complete OLETT. These expert independent raters, eight in total, were all trained, experienced counsellors drawn from a diverse range of cultures. The expert raters included men and women with experience of

tutoring and across the age range. All of them used email as a regular form of communication. It was possible by comparing the expert raters responses to those of the authors to establish a good degree of consensus of choice of adjectives in 27 out of the initial 50 emails. It was the 27 where strong agreement of adjectival choice was demonstrated which were used in the final version of OLETT.

Having established the consensus with the expert raters, the activity was further developed so that learners could go through the emails a second time in order to check their own ratings against the ratings of the counselling experts. (On screen, green dots indicated learners' choice and a red dot would indicate expert rater choice). However, it was made clear that there were no 'correct' adjectival choices as such, as the aim of the exercise was to heighten awareness and encourage reflection and the emails themselves were of course fictitious. So there were no 'correct' or 'right' choices in that sense.

Two further examples of the emails that were included in the exercise are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Example e-mails in OLETT

The Response or Second Stage

In the second stage of the exercise, the learners are re-presented with three of the 27 emails previously rated. They are asked to compose an empathic response to each in turn using what we termed the AWARE protocol. The AWARE protocol was designed by the authors and based on the core conditions for effective interpersonal relationships set out by Rogers (1975), that is genuineness, positive regard and empathy. Using this protocol it was hypothesised would encourage the conscious competence of authoring responses in online interaction with empathic communication in mind. The full form of the acronym is:

Affiliative
Warm
Appropriate
Respectful
Empathic

Learner responses to the three emails were then posted to a discussion forum provided as part of the Unit. Each of the three responses were posted to separate discussion threads. This enabled the responses from any learner to a specific email to be compared with the responses to the same email from other members of the learning group.

Here is an example of one of the emails that was provided for the learners to respond to:

> ### Post a reply to the following email:
>
> Dear Dr Quentin,
>
> Hope you are well and enjoyed your New Year holiday. I wish to say something about one of our group members but it is not easy for me. In the discussion forums and the bulletin board I have found Joseph's contributions to be very negative and unhelpful. He seems to disrespect the contributions that others of us make and is always arguing. This makes other group members not wish to make further contributions and so our discussions become dull and boring. As our module tutor we think you will want to make Joseph behave more politely to the group. We all count on you.
>
> farnoosh

Even from this fictitious example it is possible to imagine empathically how a hurried or unthought through response on the part of the tutor might lead to further misunderstandings and bruised feelings at best or relationship breakdown between tutor and student at worst.

Third Stage

In the third stage of the activity, learners are asked to provide written feedback to their fellow learners, again using the AWARE protocol. They were given the following instructions:

When your group have completed all of their responses, go through the following tasks.

- *Read each of the responses to emails 1, 2 and 3.*
- *Decide which of the responses is the most appropriate, constructive and helpful.*
- *Having made your three choices. Post your decisions and give reasons for the choice to the appropriate section of the forum.*
- *At a later date view the feedback from the whole group relating to their ranking of responses.*

The Malaysian pilot tutors were also given group feedback on the general appropriacy of their responses by one of the writers who took on the role of online tutor for the pilot group. This was additionally intended to serve as a model for using the AWARE protocol in real life. This feedback focussed mainly on the email presented above.

> In relation to the email replies you submitted, all group members showed an ability to be empathic, sensitive, warm and understanding in their responses. However, in relation to email no. 1 (the student with health and family difficulties) there was a marked tendency to be directive and advice-giving. This included 'musts', 'shoulds', 'oughts' or 'need to' in relation to where the student might seek personal support. From a guidance/counselling perspective, it is considered more helpful to avoid advice or being overly directive. Offering suggestions or ways forward could be framed as follows: 'You might find that it is useful to talk over these issues with someone you trust in order to feel supported at this difficult time in your life.'

Forms of Evaluation

There was an initial pre-pilot evaluation of OLETT by the independent expert raters who had completed the initial version comprising 60 emails. After completion of OLETT itself they were asked to provide additional written comments on the instructions, the navigation, the content of the activity and any other comments they wished to make on the tool as a whole. The independent expert raters were made up of eight trained and experienced counsellors all working in higher education and from diverse ethnic backgrounds, Caribbean, Chinese as well as European.

They all reported that they had no difficulty in following the instructions and coping with the navigation and that the content of the emails was

typical of the emails they received from students and colleagues as part of their daily working lives. Some items were reported as very difficult to make a choice or interpret the feeling in the text and these items were later deleted from the activity, together with the emails that did not obtain a reasonable consensus in the choices of adjectives to describe the underlying feelings. The word 'excellent' was used by five of the eight individuals to describe the activity in their qualitative comments.

It was this revised version of OLETT which was completed by a group of six online tutors, five female and one male from the Universiti Sains Malaysia who were a pilot group working through the e-Educator Module and whose own perceptions and evaluations can be read in this Special Issue. Despite being experienced online tutors, they had had no previous experience of being a learner in an online course and had had received no formal training for the role of online tutor. Completion of Stage 1 of OLETT revealed a 74% average correspondence between their adjective choices and the expert raters. The highest correspondence was 85% and the lowest was 68%. The average time for reading and evaluating each email was a little under 30 seconds. This is further evidence that the exercise has resonance across cultures as there were no Malaysians in the expert raters group.

The e-Educator module as a whole was evaluated by a series of focus groups meetings held with the tutors during the period in which the module was being piloted. Several specific references were made to OLETT during these focus group discussions. Some tutors expressed doubts early on about the possibility of being empathic in an email response because of the sheer volume they received daily with more than a thousand students enrolled on courses with them.

> I opened my email and there were 303 emails. And how do I think of empathy and God knows what when I'm doing it. I just can't. I just have to go straight to the point and tell them this or that.

It was as if having had the concept and practice of empathy raised into their consciousness there was an initial emotional resistance to permitting the implications of allowing empathy to become a 'way of being' (Rogers, 1975). This might be seen as unreadiness or unpreparedness to change

behaviour despite learning having occurred. Later, the same tutor was reporting her experience of the learning she had gained from working through OLETT at a Symposium and during questions she was asked about the problem of being empathic when there were a large volume of emails to respond to. Her response indicated a change of attitude:

> You don't have to increase the number of words you say to be more empathic, it's a question of the words you choose.

The initial emotional resistance appeared to have lowered over time as continued practice embedded the learning more securely. As part of the e-Educator module the tutors were asked to choose and prioritise areas for self-development personally and professionally. At this initial stage empathy was a unit given low priority. However, for the pilot trials, tutors were actually required to undertake all units, whether they had earmarked them for professional development or not. Paradoxically however, the evaluation revealed that empathy was considered to be one of the more important elements in the e-Educator training and OLETT was reported as being an important part of this training. It appears at a cognitive level that tutors knew the meaning of the word empathy and there was a direct translation of the word into Malaysian, but did not consider it an important development priority for them. However, the experiential learning gained from doing the Empathy Unit and in particular the OLETT activity, produced a much more meaningful understanding of the importance of empathy and produced changes in their attitudes and behaviour in their online tutoring which they were able to report.

At a later stage of the e-Educator module, the pilot tutors were asked to complete a qualitative evaluation form specifically on the Empathy Unit which produced several specific references to OLETT pointing to its effectiveness as a learning tool. No negative comments on OLETT as a learning tool were recorded in the over-arching evaluation.

Conclusions

Within the group of six online tutors involved in the pilot, completing the Empathy Unit does appear to have had an impact, most of which is ascribed to the OLETT exercise. This may be because the greatest

proportion of their communication with students is through email because of the large numbers registered on their courses and the difficulties this throws up. To use Howells' (1982) cycle, tutors appear to have started out in a state of unconscious incompetence in that they did not appear to regard empathy as an issue for them. Having completed the initial Self-assessment questionnaire, there begins to be a recognition that perhaps empathy might be an important concept for them to take on board in terms of relationship building with students.

> Maybe I thought I'm kind to students. Maybe I'll be kinder. That's one of the most valuable lessons.

Prior to completing OLETT the members of the pilot group did not consider that empathy was an issue for them. After completing OLETT, which provided them with the opportunity to practice changes in behaviour, they began to use their deepened understanding of the concept of empathy in the way that they framed their emails. This development is similar to Benner's (2001) notion of moving from a position of novice to expert, or going through the stages described by Howell (1982) which he describes as:

> Unconscious incompetence − this is the stage where you are not even aware that you do not have a particular competence. Conscious incompetence − this is when you know that you want to learn how to do something but you are incompetent at doing it. Conscious competence − this is when you can achieve this particular task but you are very conscious about everything you do. Unconscious competence − this is when you finally master it and you do not even think about what you have such as when you have learned to ride a bike very successfully. (Howell, 1982: 29–33)

The learning gains from the OLETT activity appeared to mark the beginning of a state of conscious competence for the pilot group and with sustained practice and experience it seems likely that they will in future move into a state of unconscious competence. However the issue of sustainability or resilience of the learning continuing on into the future will continue to be a focus of research and reported in future publications.

There is some evidence that OLETT as a learning tool is portable across cultures in that a range of individuals from diverse cultures have reported that OLETT presents them with a task which has a 'ring of truth' from their own perspective. However, because of the small numbers involved, more evidence of portability needs to be obtained from larger numbers from a wider range of cultural groupings. A form of contextual transferability appears to be being demonstrated in the responses from the pilot group, some of whom reported that they were being more empathic with family and colleagues in face-to-face settings as a result of the online training experience. However, interestingly pilot tutors were at that stage unable to provide examples of feedback which might show evidence that their increased empathy was being noticed by these people. This does not mean that the change in behaviour was not being noticed, but merely that it had not been commented upon directly. Anecdotally the learning technologist who was part of the OLETT design team reported that he was now being much more careful and empathic in the way he framed his emails as a result of being involved in design of the exercise in a concept that was new to him.

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