

“Would you ever say that to me in class?”: Exploring the Implications of Disinhibition for Relationality in Online Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Despite years of study and theorizing, we know very little about students' and instructors' experiences of relationality in online courses. This paper reports on a two-university qualitative study that sought insight into the nature and experience of relationality in asynchronous, text-based courses in which teacher and students do not come face to face. Interviews with 20 instructors and 20 students from a variety of disciplines revealed that their experiences of connection with, or disconnection from, each other were profoundly influenced by the phenomenon of online disinhibition. The online disinhibition effect is defined as the tendency of people to behave in unrestrained ways when interacting with others online. These behaviours have been classified as “benign” or “toxic.” Disinhibition has long been identified and recognized by psychologists as a factor in computer-mediated communications, but there is little research illuminating the role it plays in online teaching and learning, and what there is tends to be inconclusive. While several studies show that students do tend to behave in unrestrained ways when interacting online, students in the online course studied by Conrad (2002a and 2002b) demonstrated increased inhibition. Both students and instructors in the current study reported on many instances of benign and toxic disinhibition, although stories about the latter were more prevalent. Benign disinhibition was manifested in stories of shy students who participated more freely online, and in stories of students who disclosed more about themselves than they would face-to-face. Toxic disinhibition was manifested in stories about angry and abusive emails and posts. Students also indicated that their awareness of the possibility of anger erupting easily through miscommunication resulted in an “excessive niceness.” Thus inhibition may be a paradoxical response to the increased possibility of disinhibited behaviour in online learning environments. This study found that disinhibited behaviour, whether in its benign or toxic form, is a factor that powerfully affects the nature of student-student and student-teacher relationships in online courses.

Keywords

online learning, online disinhibition, learning management systems, relationships, relationality

Introduction

What is the experience of relationality for instructors and learners in asynchronous, text-based online courses? Since the advent of online communications in the 1980s, scholars have studied the challenges of relational development in computer-mediated exchanges lacking paralinguistic cues, with mixed results (Walther, 1995). Some studies show that, given time, people can construct viable online relational worlds (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996; Walther, 1992). However, in other cases, online relationships have been found to be shallow, impersonal, task-oriented, and even hostile (e.g., Beniger, 1987; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984).

The same inconsistencies are evident in more recent research dealing specifically with the nature of relationships in online courses. Some educators and scholars contend that mediated forms of instruction offer unique benefits that enhance communications and community, including increased equity (e.g., Kanuka and Kelland, 2008; Merryfield, 2001), participation (e.g., Davidson-Shivers, Muilenburg, & Tanner, 2001; Masters, 2004), and opportunity for

reflection (e.g., Herrington & Oliver, 2002). Others, however, express concern with the extent to which the large “transactional distances” (Moore, 1993) inherent to asynchronous courses may impede dialogue and student engagement (e.g., Kanuka, Collett, & Caswell, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003). Selwyn (2014) further suggests that, given the ideological ground of neo-liberalism and hyper-individualism in which educational technologies have grown, virtual learning environments “can easily be used to frame the relationships between teachers and students in terms of finite services or contracts rather than sustained human interaction,” thereby “displacing the substantive social relationships and social practices that traditionally have been seen to constitute education” (p. 134).

Despite the plethora of research on online interactions over the past two decades or more, Wilson and Switzer (2012) contend that we still know very little about “the human dynamics of instructor and students working together” (p. 1). They further suggest that attempts to theorize about the nature of online relationships—for example, by developing such constructs as social presence (Rourke, Anderson, & Garrison, 1999; Tu, 2002), interaction levels (Anderson, 2003; Moore, 1989), and online communities of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009)—ultimately reduce the complexity of “human transactions in online learning environments” to “a fairly holistic view” (p. 1). While this form of inquiry may yield useful guidelines for designing more interactive, responsive, and engaging online pedagogies and learning environments (e.g., Aragon, 2003; Lehman & Conceição, 2010), it does not always help to illuminate the *experience* of relationality in courses in which the teacher and learners never come face to face. Yet this is a phenomenon we need to understand better, given that teaching, whether on- or offline, is more than merely the exchange of information; it also involves the creation of “a special relationship” (Noddings, 1984/2003, p. 195) based on trust and mutual respect.

This paper emerges from a three-year, two-university study that sought a grounded, nuanced understanding of how relationality is experienced by teachers and learners who interact within the bounds of largely asynchronous, and characteristically text-based, learning management systems (LMSs) such as Desire2Learn, Moodle, and Blackboard. My analysis of the qualitative data revealed that instructors’ and students’ experiences of connection with, or disconnection from, each other were profoundly influenced by the phenomenon of online disinhibition.

The Study

During 2010 and 2011, interviews were conducted by myself, my research collaborator, and our graduate research assistants. The research participants were 20 students and 20 instructors at the Canadian universities of New Brunswick and Alberta, respondents to requests for volunteer participants placed in the universities’ daily e-news bulletins. While the student participants were located within many disciplines and programs (primarily graduate), all had taken at least one online course, via either Blackboard or Moodle. Similarly, the instructor participants came from a variety of disciplines; some were full-time tenure track and others were part-time, and they had varying degrees of online expertise. However, all had taught at least one LMS-based course. The courses were all asynchronous, although many of the students and instructors reported participating in or incorporating synchronous elements, such as Elluminate sessions. Further information about course design and online pedagogy was not collected.

The interviews were open-ended and informal. They generally took place on campus, in the offices of the instructors or the interviewers, and were 60 to 90 minutes long. A set of probes was used to elicit responses about participants’ specific experiences of online teaching and learning—for example, “Can you talk about the last time you used a learning management system? Can you tell me what happened?”; “What kinds of relationships did you build with your online students? Can you give me a specific example?”

The emergent nature of qualitative research becomes most evident during the process of data analysis. As Morse (1994) observes, when interpreting qualitative data, “the researcher must remain open to alternative modes of sorting, to alternative explanations, and to alternative theories” (p. 33). Accordingly, as I read and reread the interview transcripts in order to discern thematic structures and patterns, a somewhat startling trend emerged. It appeared that, for both students and instructors, a distinctive dimension of the online experience had to do with the

students' sometimes unrestrained, unusual, or extreme behaviour. In order to better understand what was going on, I turned to the literature on online disinhibition.

What is Online Disinhibition?

Since the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, researchers in psychology and computer-mediated communication have found that, when people interact online, they tend to do so with less restraint than in face-to-face interactions, and such unrestrained behavior tends to occur with greater frequency and intensity (Joinson, 2007)—hence, the prevalence of such online behaviours as flaming and cyberbullying. As Suler (2004) observes,

people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly. So pervasive is the phenomenon that a term has surfaced for it: the *online disinhibition effect*. (p. 321)

Joinson (1998) defines online disinhibition as “any behavior that is characterized by an *apparent* reduction in concerns for self-presentation and the judgement of others” (p. 44). These unusual and extreme online behaviours may be classified as either “benign” or “toxic” (Suler, 2004). Benign disinhibition (labeled “positive disinhibition” by Vybíral and Skorunka, 2006) is manifested when people with offline communicative difficulties, such as shyness, demonstrate a willingness or ability to open up and participate in online discussions (see, for example, Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2000; Scealy, Phillips, & Stevenson, 2002). In toxic disinhibition, “we witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats” (Suler, 2004, p. 321), and other actions that break with social norms and etiquette.

Distinguishing between benign and toxic disinhibition is useful. However, Suler (2004) cautions that “As in all conceptual dichotomies, the distinction between benign and toxic disinhibition will be complex or ambiguous in some cases” (p. 321). For example, benign inhibition is not all that benign when individuals self-disclose too much or inappropriately, making others feel uncomfortable and themselves exposed or ashamed. Furthermore, research suggests a need for additional categories. Chester (2006), for instance, observed that students interacting in the unfamiliar environment of a MOO experienced not only decreased shyness but what she calls “regressive inhibition,” defined as “a reversion to dependent, child-like behaviour” (p. 135).

Research on the causes of online disinhibition is not conclusive. Suler (2004) identifies six possible contributing factors: anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection (a sense that the textual conversation is with oneself rather than others), dissociative imagination (a sense that online interactions take place in an unreal online world), and minimization of status authority in the absence of the visual cues that typically distinguish authority figures. Others have suggested that factors such as reduced social cues (Spears & Lea, 1992) and decreased public self-awareness (Matheson & Zanna, 1988) play an important role in contributing to disinhibited behaviour. Most studies consider the impact of only one of these factors: anonymity (Joinson, 2001 & 2007). However, based on research with 142 post-secondary students, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) conclude that lack of eye contact plays a much greater role than anonymity in creating the conditions in which disinhibited behaviours, particularly those of the toxic variety, arise.

My search of the online databases turned up only a handful of inquiries dealing directly with the nature and implications of disinhibition for online teaching and learning. In one of these, a study of interpersonal conflict between sixth-grade students interacting within a computer supported collaborative learning environment, Prata et al. (2009) conclude that, “One clear implication of our results is that insults and interpersonal conflict play a prominent role in collaborative learning, which cannot be safely ignored” (p. 8). Galbraith and Jones (2010) similarly assert the prevalence of what they call “incivility” in online postsecondary education. Based on their experiences as first-time online instructors, Rossi and Hinton (2005) observe:

Students and teachers do not interact in the same way in online learning environments as they do in face-to-face environments....By far the ugliest aspect of this course was the nature of some of the student-to-teacher interactions. While a number of these exchanges were expressions of student frustration related to being online, others were considerably more personal and confrontational. These aggressive student exchanges (student-to-student and student-to-teacher) were more difficult to fathom and professionally challenging to manage....The exchanges had a negative effect upon the learning environment. (p. 14)

However, an earlier study of students' anonymous online interactions by Chester and Gwynne (1998) yielded more mixed results: some students reported feeling liberated by their anonymity, some indicated that they had disclosed more about themselves than they would have in a face-to-face class, and half reported that they experienced more aggression online than in face-to-face classes. Muddying the waters further is research by Conrad (2002a, 2002b), whose study of an online Adult Education course found that students exhibited not disinhibition but *inhibition*—that is, an excessive “niceness” that had them attending scrupulously to matters of netiquette, in order to avoid conflict.

Stories of Benign and Toxic Disinhibition

In the current study, many of the instructor and student participants offered stories of both benign and toxic disinhibition. However, the latter appeared to be far more prevalent within the facelessness and semi-anonymity of online courses, and even stories of benign disinhibition tended to veer quite close to the toxic.

Several students commented upon the benefits of benign disinhibition in online courses for those who were shy in face-to-face situations. Amanda (all names are pseudonyms) told the story of a classmate who “was very quiet and didn't say much” in a face-to-face class. Online, however, she was “more ‘talkative’...I was actually quite happy to know she wasn't as shy or reserved as I thought she was in person. I even remember talking to myself as I was reading her post. I was laughing because I was actually cheering her on, that she could finally say something in class.” Similarly, Emerson recalled “one guy who couldn't speak, who couldn't do a presentation” in a face-to-face class. “He would stutter, he was nervous, and his face would go all red, and he couldn't put a sentence together. But on Moodle, he was *brilliant*.” John offered a personal perspective on the benefits of benign disinhibition in an online course, observing that interacting with his classmates and teacher online “gave you a bit of security; you weren't afraid to post, you know, and act crazy or stupid...It's just not having anyone around you” that made it easier for him to participate. He gave the example of a synchronous Elluminate session, in which, he said, “I raised my hand more...than I would in a face-to-face class.” But not all students found the online environment disinhibiting. Candice told a story about “one girl who is a little bit more quiet sometimes, but she talks longer [online],” but added that for her, the online environment was actually more inhibiting than face-to-face: “I talked less.”

Two instructors shared stories supporting the proposition that “Without the cues that can sometimes stifle contributions, otherwise quiet students might find a voices” (Chester & Gwynne, 1998, ¶ 5). According to Jenny, an experienced instructor teaching her first online course, her students were more “open” and “willing to share things...that they would not have shared, maybe, face to face.” She gave the example of a student who shared her deeply felt feelings, as a mother, about discrepancies between the quality of educational experiences available to her children in New Brunswick and to their cousins in Toronto—a story Jenny doubted would have been told if the discussion had been in a face-to-face environment. Nadia related a similar anecdote about a student who opened up, online, about his own learning disabilities: “And I was struck by that, and wondered what propelled him to do that...And I've decided, because you can't see me, I don't care.” Soon after, Nadia found that the student's self-disclosure had changed the dynamic of the course: “Suddenly, people were making connections with respect to the material in a very personal way that probably wouldn't happen in a face-to-face class for a good long time.” Nadia went on to explain her students' openness in this way: “People are quite forthcoming, especially since there is a certain anonymity, even if they see each other's little picture. Somehow, there is real and yet not real. And so they are quite forthcoming with certain details of their lives.”

However, although many of the instructors interviewed agreed that their students tended to be more open and sharing online than in face-to-face situations, not all found this openness to be a positive aspect of the online experience. Some expressed confusion or concern about the extent to which students shared “some things that are extremely personal,” “some very personal stuff...that should not have gone through.” Even Jenny admitted that sometimes students’ sharing could become problematic: “I didn’t know what to do about it when they were starting to write about more personal experiences.”

For Bill, students’ openness and sharing resulted in some memorable experiences that were “very dark, or very shocking to me.” An experienced online instructor, Bill found that that his students were actually not inclined to open up to their classmates in online courses; in fact, to the contrary, he claimed that they generally “feel very uncomfortable taking a position electronically.” But, he added, “where it has been really rich is the mail aspect of it, [which] has allowed for personal things to be shared that I never expected.” Bill recounted two stories about students confiding in him via the LMSs email. In the first, a student told him how important the problems and puzzles he gave the class were to her family. Subsequently, with no prodding, she revealed that she had been given guardianship of a nephew who had killed his father, so, she wrote, “for our family just to sit down and play with something has just been so healthy for us.” While Bill viewed the opportunity for this kind of sharing as positive and cathartic—something “that would not have arisen if that wasn’t a Blackboard course”—his second story, about an online student who told him she was a victim of spousal abuse, illuminated the darker side of such disclosures. “Blackboard scares me,” Bill said, “really scares me, because I’ve had things written that I can just not respond to safely.” Diana spoke of similar experiences, including a student who told her via LMS email about her suicidal feelings: “she felt comfortable writing, I think, rather than facing anybody.”

Disquieting as such experiences were to the instructors involved, they would be labeled as examples of benign disinhibition. However, most of the stories recounted by both instructors and students fall clearly into the category of toxic disinhibition, in which students act out in disruptive or confrontational ways. One of the most striking tales was told by Allison, who, while teaching her first online course, encountered a student who “was really hard on me, challenged me on everything.” After receiving a mark that he didn’t like, the student emailed Allison a death threat. “My stomach did a few somersaults and I showed it to a colleague...and he said, oh my god.” Allison believed that this incident was directly attributable to the freedom from restraint inherent to the online environment: “I don’t think it would have happened face to face.”

Heather, an experienced online instructor, told a similar story about a student who “ripped me apart,” “literally blast[ed] me...’cause she didn’t like the grade she got...And I kept thinking would you walk into my office and say those types of things to me?” According to Heather, such student behaviour was not uncommon in her online courses, “and I think, is it because there’s this screen and you can’t see me? That you’re more apt to yell at me, you know, make comments about...how could I be so wrong in this grade I’ve given you?...Would you do this if there wasn’t a screen in front of you?...Would you ever say that to me in class?”

Students also recounted stories of people turning “ugly” or “abusive” in online posts, making “personal attacks” against classmates, even “swearing at people, calling them idiots and stuff like that.” One student, Patricia, attributed this tendency to people’s comfort with the online environment: “something that was surprising to me was that people were comfortable enough with the environment to lose a sense of decorum...like they just lost it.” However, in most of the students’ stories, arguments and disruptive behaviour were seen as the direct result of the kinds of miscommunications that occur in online environments, where paralinguistic cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice are not available to clarify meaning. Joanna, for example, told the story of “a fight” in one of her courses that began when one student complained about a second student’s response to his post. “They said that it was very negative, and then [the second] student responded back...‘I was just trying to comment...it wasn’t offensive at all.’” As the argument grew more heated, “there were like twenty posts all at once, back and forth between those two people. The language was like capital letters; it sounded like someone was frustratedly typing.” Patricia recounted a similar incident in which an argument escalated from “a misunderstanding. Wrong use of terms, wrong use of words, and people reacted to that, and it started from there, and it just grew.”

Recollecting an experience when one of her posts was “misinterpreted by one of the other participants in the class,” Jill observed that, in an online course, “you have to be careful about the audience and...what they’re hearing and what you’re trying to say....You have to be careful and re-read what you’ve written to make sure you’re not offending anyone.” Jill’s point here, the need to tread carefully in online discussions, was reiterated by several other students. For example, Joan insisted that online discussions are “not the same as being in a classroom environment where you can have total freedom...of discussion...’cause it’s typed...that’s why you have to be so careful.” As a result, the discussions are “almost too nice.” Anita agreed that in interactions in online courses, “people can take things the wrong way and you have to be so careful with how you write because they don’t really get the [right] impression because it’s just words.” This tendency to take excessive care—what Grace called a “sort of weird, virtual politeness thing”—may explain Conrad’s (2002a, 2002b) findings regarding student inhibition in online courses. As the comments above suggest, students’ awareness that abusive behaviour and extreme responses to miscommunications are more likely in faceless, asynchronous online environments may cause them to self-regulate their own behavior, to become hyper-vigilant in their relations with others. Inhibited behaviour, in other words, is a rather paradoxical response to the perpetual possibility of toxic disinhibition.

Reflections on Relationality

Despite decades of inconclusive research, the notion that strong connections and communities can develop online is becoming a more or less established orthodoxy in the scholarship of educational technology and networked learning. However, human relationships are complex and unpredictable at the best of times, and understanding the nature of relationality in situations when individuals do not come face to face can be particularly problematic. Discussions about such constructs as social presence, interaction levels, and communities of inquiry tend to homogenize experience rather than capturing the complex dynamics of relationality. Thus we cannot explain why, for example, hostilities or other barriers to communication might arise in an online course despite, or perhaps even as a result of, the use of multiple strategies for maximizing social presence.

The findings of this qualitative study are consistent with previous research suggesting that disinhibited behaviour, whether in its benign or toxic form, often arises in asynchronous, text-based communications. The study further suggests that online disinhibition may powerfully affect the nature of student-student and student-teacher relationships—and thus learning—in these online environments. In some cases, that relationship may be enriched—for example, when a student shares an experience that personalizes and thus deepens the learning for everyone, or when a shy student opens up. In other cases, the relationship may be inevitably damaged, as when a student confides something she later regrets, or says something that other students consider inappropriate or offensive. This study also suggests that disinhibition may go hand-in-hand with inhibition; in other words, the increased possibility that others will communicate in an unrestrained way creates in some students an excessive “niceness.” Further research in this area will give us greater insight into the tensions between disinhibition and inhibition in online courses, and the effects this tension has on both relationality and learning.

The terminology of “delivery” that accompanies the current move by many universities to put more and more of their courses online suggests that education is simply a matter of transmitting information effectively; but of course, it is also, importantly, about the formation of relationships between instructors and students. Much more research is needed to help us understand how those relationships develop, or fail to develop, in environments where teachers and learners never come face to face.

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