

How Affective Experiences Mediate Learning in Online and Traditional Classes: Findings From Student Interviews

ABSTRACT

Ten students compared affective experiences in traditional and online learning environments, describing the roles these experiences played in their learning. Emotions deemed most significant to learning were frustration, confidence, reduced inhibition, and desire for independence (online); and desire for recognition, connection/nurturing, and sense of respect for the instructor (traditional).

NARRATIVE

In a qualitative study contrasting student experiences in online and traditional mathematics class settings, ten students were interviewed about their experiences in both settings. Students described their affective responses to each environment and the effect of those responses on their learning. The contrasting responses illuminate aspects of each setting that may enhance or constrain learning.

Online students described frustration associated with trying to understand new material without the benefit of an instructor's presence or personal guidance. For some students, the frustration was a motivating factor that increased their own engagement and ownership of the learning process. For others, the frustration led them to conclude that they should not pursue further online learning. Online students also reported an increased sense of confidence related to the ability to work more at their own pace. They described feeling freedom from the pressure of a traditional classroom where an instructor governs the pace of a learning activity. Related to this freedom is the reduced sense of inhibition that online students described because they were not "on stage" in front of instructor or peers and therefore felt more inclined to explore without fear of appearing foolish. Finally, some online students described a strong desire to master the material without having to seek help, a disposition likely related to the constructive frustration described earlier. Possibly these students chose the online environment because they already held this desire; the online setting may also have fostered such a mindset.

Students in the traditional setting noted having a sense of security when the instructor was available for personal guidance. Students expressed a connection with the instructor that motivated them to engage and to understand. The specifics varied, but themes included desire for recognition/praise, a sense of being nurtured by the instructor, a shared bond with the instructor through humor, and a sense of respect for the instructor.