E-Teaching In Online Workplaces: Great Work? Great Feelings?

Kenny McIntosh
University of Aberdeen, School of Education, Aberdeen, Scotland

Abstract - This paper outlines a small-scale phenomenological study of teacher educators’ experience of feelings in online workplaces and responds to the question – how do teacher educators’ feelings relate to their work in online workplaces? In this study the term “online workplaces” covers the range of internet-connected communication systems that might be used while ‘doing the job’ of e-teacher, teacher educator. Typically, it includes e-mail systems, blogs, video-conferences, discussion forums and virtual learning environments such as WebCT. Online workplaces are typically located at home, in office buildings and in any of the geographically diverse places (hotels, airports, schools, University campuses, etc) e-teacher, teacher educators travel to in the course of their working lives and which facilitate internet-connected communications and interaction in the course of their work as teacher educator. Although focused on a specific vocation, given the ubiquity of e-teaching and e-learning in corporate and academic contexts, initial findings suggest wider relevance by drawing attention to the role of the affect in working as an e-teacher in online workplaces. E-teachers experience a range of feelings in online workplaces, and those feelings impact reflexively on professional identity and well-being, on working practices and workplace culture, and on interactions and relationships with others working in such settings.

Index terms – e-teaching, feelings, teacher educators, online workplaces.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the pursuit of both corporate and academic goals while it is entirely necessary, even in less economically turbulent and uncertain times than in recession-ridden 2009, to turn the researcher’s gaze to the many and varied factors that identify, promote or inhibit e-learning in workplaces, I contend that it is equally necessary to examine the factors that impact on e-teaching in workplaces. It is my belief that e-teaching in workplaces has been under-researched and that the part played by emotions on the work of e-teachers warrants particular investigation. A distinction between emotions and feelings is central to the research reported here: emotions are public and outwardly directed whereas feelings are private and inwardly directed. In other words, feelings are mental experiences of emotions [1].

In asserting that great work starts with great feeling, Goleman [2] draws attention to the common Latin root of the words motive and emotion; motere which means ‘to move’. This, he argues, supports his belief that emotions drive our motivations; emotions are what move us towards our goals. Goleman also states that motives, in turn, can be identified as driving perceptions and actions. Damasio, [3] declares emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision-making. Synthesising Damasio and Goleman’s claims above and applying them to the context of online teaching in teacher education aroused this researcher’s curiosity about the possible significance of Goleman’s assertion for the professional development of e-teachers in general, but particularly for e-teachers working in teacher education, the field of employment I have been working in for almost thirty years and in which I therefore have personal, vested and current interest. In other words, I have been driven to examine the part played by the affect in the motives, perceptions, actions, reasoning and decision-making of teachers whose work is largely undertaken through computer-linked modes of teaching, communication and interaction with colleagues and students. It is this curiosity that has driven the research reflected in this short paper.

Over the last twenty years or so arguments relating technological developments with cost-effectiveness, expansion of opportunity and convenience have prevailed within Higher Education and in the corporate training arena, to the extent that teaching and learning online are held as part and parcel. Computer-mediated communication is lauded as having the ability to support high levels of high-order, responsive interaction between participants while creating increased freedom in terms of place and time to engage in such interaction. In addition, the inevitable demands and constraints of time, place and attendance that characterise traditional structures of lectures, seminars and workshops have been made less significant by the liberating power of asynchronous e-learning and its ‘anytime, anywhere’ potential. However, e-teacher pedagogies have had to take account of the vagaries of working in an environment in which familiar language, bonds, cues, tones and relationships of face-to-face interaction have had to be modified or replaced. E-teachers and students alike have had to deal with the sense of being disconnected from others in their class.
and, consequently, develop modes of communication and a paralanguage that can effectively replace what has been lost in moving to blended (a mix of face-to-face and online) or wholly online learning. Enhanced opportunities for student collaboration afforded through computer-mediated communication have transformed the student-tutor relationship in e-courses, with the e-teacher’s role becoming more that of facilitator than lecturer and the e-student’s very much that of active learner [5].

Given the above, if Goleman’s dictum about great work starting with great feeling stands scrutiny, and if the quality of teachers’ work is to be acknowledged as having any kind of bearing on the quality of the work of learners, then it seems necessary to examine the nature and roles of e-teachers’ feelings in their work and their workplaces. My main research question emerges from this imperative: how do teacher educators’ feelings relate to their work in online workplaces? My approach to searching for an answer has been informed by three sub-questions. First, what do teacher educators feel working as e-teachers? Second, what are e-teacher teacher educators’ conscious of when they reflect on their emotional processes as they relate to their work? The third sub-question is intended to frame the relevance of my research for e-teachers’ professional development as well as elicit directions for further research; what needs to be done to ensure that e-teacher teacher educators experience great feelings and that great work accrues from such feelings?

As a teacher working across a wide range of courses related to teacher education, I have become an e-teacher. In discharging my professional responsibilities as teacher educator I routinely connect with colleagues, students, materials and activities via the computer. By clicking a few buttons on my keypad I shuttle instantly between libraries, classrooms and staffrooms that are unbounded in time and space, between e-mail system and virtual learning environment, between discussion forums and blogs, between video-conferences and web pages, from one e-course to another and from an e-learner located in one part of the country to another located miles away but similarly situated in cyberspace as an e-learner.

From personal experience and conversations with colleagues it seems clear that e-teacher, teacher educators experience a range of feelings related to working in online workplaces and that those feelings can and sometimes do give rise to actions and thought processes that impact on professional identity, well-being, working practices, workplace culture, interactions and relationships with others working in such settings. My research emerges from a belief that teacher educators’ feelings about working in online workplaces, and the roles played by such feelings in teaching in those settings, have been neglected in professional development for teacher educators, largely because they have been under-conceptualised in educational research literature. Accordingly, a core goal of my study is to frame a relevant and valuable contribution to the professional development of those working as e-teachers in teacher education certainly, but also across wider settings in Higher Education and in the corporate world.

II. CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Sutton and Wheatley [6] provide a key prompt for my research: There is surprisingly little recent research about the emotional aspects of teachers’ lives. It is true that writers such as Nias [7], Kelchtermans [8], Hargreaves [9], and Beard, Clegg and Smith [10] fully acknowledge the critical role played by emotions in teaching but it is equally true that there has been little research into the emotional lives of e-teachers. Nevertheless, environmental factors that shape emotional processes in learning and teaching contexts have been examined, most notably the social, interactive dimension of computer-linked teaching and learning, and the functionality of the e-teacher.

The functions of the e-teacher and the social locus of emotions in computer-linked educational settings are focused on by Salmon [11], whose ‘five-stage model of teaching and learning online’ indeed acknowledges the important role of emotions in making the most of the affordances of online learning for people to work, teach and learn together, but whose focus is mainly on how consciousness of the power of emotions in teaching and learning can inform principles for sensitive and appropriate conference design and e-moderator’s intervention, and not on emotional processes at the level of the individual online participant. Salmon does cite qualities such as motivation intuitiveness, resilience, conscientiousness, self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity and the ability to influence in the context of characteristics she deems to be of key importance in the recruitment of e-moderators, but these characteristics are scarcely discussed and appear more as items in a list of desiderata.

Other writers such as Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer [12], for example, locate emotions in computer conferencing contexts within their concept of social presence, defined as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry. Two aspects of this definition and hence of this concept are of particular interest. First, that the research focus is on the expression of emotions rather than on the experience of feelings attached to emotions and, second, that there is an absence of a research focus on the emotions, either felt or expressed, of teachers. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer [13] investigate the role of the teacher online in their concept of teaching presence, which the authors define as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive
and social processes or the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. They thus conceptualise teaching presence as having three categories: design and organisation, facilitating discourse and direct instruction but, in doing so, discuss teaching in computer conferencing contexts in terms of function rather than in terms of the phenomenon of teaching online. In none of Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer’s categories of teaching presence is there any explicit ascribing of the role of the affect.

Gilmore and Warren [14], reviewing the literature on online teaching, argue that while there is a considerable and growing corpus of literature focusing on practical issues of online teaching there is a marked absence of any acknowledgement of the emotional dimension that attends online teaching. In the interests of developing effective, more informed and successful online teachers Gilmore and Warren urge researchers to undertake further research into aspects of the emotionality of teaching. My research responds in no small part to this exhortation.

Set against this dearth however, is the relative wealth of literature that focuses on emotions in workplaces and, in particular, on the relationship between the management of emotions and desired employee and organisational outcomes. For example, the concept of emotion regulation is central to the work of Hochschild [15], Ashforth and Humphrey [16], Gross [17], Grandey, [18], and Fineman, Maitlis and Panteli, [19]. Each discusses contexts, purposes and strategies for regulating emotions in workplaces, as well as the implications of emotion management for employee well-being. Goleman [1, 20] and Cherniss and Goleman [21] outline and compare a number of tools for assessing employees’ emotional intelligence, and present arguments for the deployment of such tools in the interest of research-informed recruitment and the subsequent development of highly effective and successful people in corporate settings.

III. METHODOLOGY

Through the metaphor of a compass Sieben [22] provides a conceptual tool for researching emotions and virtual work. Her compass, she argues, brings together a range of research perspectives, facilitates reflections on different approaches and purposes of conducting research into the interplay between aspects of emotion and online work, and subsequently supports researchers as they plot a path for their work. I used Sieben’s compass to select an approach that most closely suits my purposes and epistemological assumptions. Regarding the former, the core purpose of my research is to gain access to the inner worlds of e-teachers, to what appears in consciousness [23], and hence to enable me to describe the phenomenon of teacher educators’ feelings in relation to working in online workplaces. Regarding the latter, my first epistemological assumption is that the knowledge I seek emerges from analysis of my participants’ subjective perspectives on, and descriptions of their inner worlds. The second is that in order to gain access to participants’ affective experiences of being a teacher educator in online workplaces I must get as close as possible to the subjective reality that participants construct in their inner worlds. Thus, Sieben’s compass helped orientate my research in an interpretive paradigm in general and, specifically, in the transcendental phenomenology of Moustakas [23] in which the phenomenon of e-teachers’ experience of feelings in relation to online work is conceived as emergent and examined as situated. In other words, my research focuses on subjects’ feelings in relation to the particulars of a particular kind of environment, and that my analysis of data involves searching for features of, and relationships between feelings, online work and online workplaces that are not established in advance of the research.

Moustakas’ transcendental phenomenology was especially appealing because of its central concept of intentionality and its construction of research participants as co-researchers. Moustakas explains intentionality as the internal experience of being conscious of something. This appealed because of its correspondence with my desire to examine only feelings that my research participants were aware of, along with their consciousness of anything that they consider to have relatedness to those feelings. The notion of research participants as co-researchers resonated because it acknowledged the importance for me of participants remaining close to what they were describing of their experiences of the phenomenon in question so that they could deepen their understanding of and insights into their own experiences through interacting with me. This sat full-square with the aspiration that my research would be of wider value than to meeting my degree requirements only.

To operationalise my epistemological assumptions I planned four phases for data gathering. The first phase involved selecting three co-researchers (TE1, TE2 and TE3) working in the same institution, with some sharing of e-teaching across a range of disparate e-courses, and representing a range of experience in and commitment to e-teaching. The second phase involved designing an interview guide, while the third required me to adapt the form of research interview that Zimmerman and Wieder [24] describe as a diary-interview; in my study this involved asking co-researchers to maintain a chronological record in the form of a series of audio recordings, made at times over a three-month period ending Christmas 2008 and in locations that suited individual co-researchers, of feelings aroused while working as e-teachers in online workplaces. These recordings were subsequently converted to MP3 format and emailed to me. The
audio recordings were transcribed and used in their own right as instruments for gathering data but also as a basis for the fourth and final phase, which was a face-to-face, one-to-one, semi-structured interview with each co-researcher, conducted and recorded through March 2009. During these interviews questions designed to elicit expanded commentaries on selected statements from respective co-researchers’ audio files were asked alongside set questions that were asked of each of the three co-researchers. My analysis of the data followed Moustakas’ procedures for transcendental phenomenological research.

IV. OVERVIEW OF EMERGENT FINDINGS

From between sixty and one hundred minutes of audio data provided by each of the three co-researchers my early analysis suggests there are six inter-related themes that characterise how teacher educators’ feelings relate to their work in online workplaces. Of these themes two constitute what I will call the affective dimension of interaction in e-teaching, while the remaining four characterise what I conceive as the affective dimension of being in e-teaching:

A. The affective dimension of interaction in e-teaching
1) E-teachers’ consciousness of relationships with others in e-workplaces
2) E-teachers’ consciousness of communications with others in e-workplaces

B. The affective dimension of being in e-teaching
1) E-teachers’ consciousness of self as teachers
2) E-teachers’ consciousness of professional responsibility in e-workplaces
3) E-teachers’ consciousness of approaches to working with tension and contradiction in e-workplaces
4) E-teachers’ consciousness of being reflective practitioners as e-teachers

The emergence and inter-relatedness of these themes is illustrated by sampling what co-researchers describe of their feelings as e-teachers working in e-workplaces. The first two depictions below of co-researchers’ experiences as e-teachers have a particular focus on their consciousness of affective aspects of relationships and communications with others in e-workplaces but are indicative of how their consciousness of being in e-teaching is interwoven with what they are aware of regarding affective elements of their interactions with others in e-workplaces. The third depiction shifts the focus to co-researchers’ consciousness of being in e-teaching but demonstrates how each of the affective themes of being are undergirded by consciousness of the affective dimension of interactions with others in e-workplaces.

TE1 feels pride in leading innovations as an e-teacher on a national arena, self-efficacy in using a wide range of e-tools in discharging responsibilities as an e-teacher, and joy at the commitment of e-learners. However, TE1 feels profound frustration over one particular e-learner’s lack of engagement in one online course, perceiving that student as a dissenter and a problem. Nevertheless, TE1 is highly motivated to support e-learners: this must be the third or fourth time I’ve checked out the sites today and makes repeated attempts over several weeks to engage that student. Since that e-learner is also working full-time as a teacher very few opportunities for personal contact arise. TE1 reasons that the e-learner will have less pressure from daily work commitments and more time for the e-course during the school holidays and thus decides to wait until then before making a further attempt at contact. TE1’s subsequent decision-making involves persisting in their attempts at contact over an even longer period even though other e-courses are commencing, thus incurring an even greater workload and stress through this e-learner’s ongoing lack of engagement. Meanwhile, TE1 is confronted by their line manager who requires TE1 to take on an assessment load belonging to a face-to-face course that TE1 does not teach on, additional frustration and seething resentment is experienced: I’m still smarting greatly from that carry-on with (line manager) trying to load even more marking on to me. TE1’s relationships with both the e-learner in question and the line manager are perceived in very negative terms, and TE1 experiences deep discontentment about the organisation in which they work, its systems, structures and relationships with senior personnel. In spite of this TE1’s motivation to support e-learners prevails and they decide to press on regardless: I will probably work here until about seven o’clock…and I’m either asleep by nine o’clock or I’m back on the internet checking out the groups, so at some point tonight I’ll go back on again and check these three sites.

TE2 feels unable to resist comparing experiences and feelings as an e-teacher and as a teacher in face-to-face settings. In face-to-face teaching TE2 feels able to make personalised responses to students that are relevant, meaningful and effective: you’re aware of immediate reactions of people, you’re scanning people’s body language and faces. However, as an e-teacher, TE2 feels much less self-efficacious in communicating with e-learners: because there’s not the immediacy of feedback online it does change the feeling of the work that you’re doing, believing that in working with e-learners there is little sense of students as individuals who have preferred learning styles and preferences in the kinds of interactions with teachers that best suit them as learners and as people. Having been reluctantly co-opted onto the teaching team of an e-course designed by a colleague, and in an aspect of the subject they feel unqualified to teach TE2 admits to not looking forward to it with any great enthusiasm. TE2 reasons that the antecedents of the reluctance to communicate with e-learners in one particular e-course
lie across several areas of the e-workplace. First, TE2 perceives tenuous bonds between members of the e-teaching team into which TE2 has been drawn: I've got a sense of being a member of something that’s trying to do something but it doesn’t have the regular contact, the shared norms and values that develop through daily or regular work and interaction. Second, TE2 perceives that it’s someone else’s course and perceives the professional self as a hired hand, and that their role on that particular e-course as reduced to almost a bit-player, making sporadic appearances. Third, TE2 perceives institutional issues... that are at the heart of how I’m feeling. Specifically, TE2 believes that the organisation in which they work does not value online discussion with e-learners, asserting that the workload schedules that are constructed to represent what we do do not take account of time spent in discussion with students online. Fourth, TE2 feels assailed by the perceptions that organisational values clash with their own values: I most certainly want to encourage high levels of participation because of the value to their learning that can accrue to working and thinking together online, so there’s this kind of institutional lack of recognition that’s come into conflict with my own personal values and creates difficulties. Fifth, TE2 feels very frustrated by the way that the students online have actually been constructing their responses, failing to act on TE2’s instruction to thread their responses in order to develop coherent lines of discussion and to make it easier for their e-teacher to contribute. Sixth, TE2 is troubled by the perception that their relationships with e-learners in the e-class in question are disrupting any motivation to communicate with them: I don’t feel personally affiliated to this class. I’ve never met any of them personally. I don’t know any of them; build no sense of who these people are as human beings. They’re names on the screen. I don’t know where they live. I don’t know anything about them and this is problematic. However, TE2 is, like TE1, highly motivated as an e-teacher and is conscious of the values that underpin motivation: I’m driven by trying to do a good job for students. I’m driven by pride in doing a good job for the sake of being a decent professional if I can be. This leads TE2 to make the decision to draw on all my resources of resilience and determination to do a good job of professionalism and to draw on twenty-five years of experience as a teacher to overcome my aversion emotionally to go online.

TE3 feels discomfort and anxiety about new practices and new technologies in their workplace, experiencing a sinking feeling and worry about the prospect of increased workload attending the process of learning about new technologies. TE3 also believes an online medium is not conducive to teaching core aspects of their subject: I still have this feeling that they really need to be with us face-to-face to see how we work, ways of being. Perceived inadequacy in communications in the e-workplace concern TE3: I think it’s the human touch that I feel is lacking in my style of working online because I’m working in a manner where I’m responding to students by text and they’re communicating with me by text. In spite of these perceived impediments TE3 is enthusiastic about the affordances of new technologies yet is conscious of being in a contradictory position because of concomitant feelings relating to tentativeness in engaging with them, largely because of the perception on increased workload. TE3 is conscious of other tensions and contradictions while working in the e-workplace. For example, TE3 feels virtuous about giving full and free expression to emotions while teaching in face-to-face settings: working with students I’d say that one of the things that makes me an effective tutor is because I get passionate and students respond to that, however, when e-teaching TE3 also believes: I have got to be a model of moderation and I’ve got to be very measured and it’s my role to show both sides of any coin and to help people to work out their own understandings so I can’t go in there expressing untoward emotion because that’s showing a bias towards a viewpoint and it’s not the University’s place to do that. A further contradiction for TE3 as an e-teacher lies in feeling good about face-to-face learners who take the time and make the effort to correspond via email about what was said in the face-to-face lecture or workshop, in other words using e-tools in a face-to-face context, but feeling considerably less pleasure in working with e-learners due to feelings of inadequacy in handling e-tools in an e-teaching context. These negative feelings coalesce in a metaphorical self-perception as someone who, in a domestic setting and being faced with a huge pile of ironing, feels intimidated by the effort that will have to be expended to tackle the jumbled heap in the washing basket: I feel that I’m not good at my work online. I don’t do as much as I feel I should online. It’s almost as if I’m really turned off by it. It’s always at the bottom of my list; I put it off. It’s like a big pile of ironing you’ve got to do that you just avoid and avoid. I procrastinate and do other things I enjoy more. TE3 reasons they might not be able to meet the University’s expectations about performance as an e-teacher and fears that new technology might constitute an insurmountable barrier to doing a good job. A reluctance to engage with e-learners and the e-tools of the workplace ensues: I’m always bumping the work that I do with them to the bottom of the list of my priorities. TE3 feels guilt about avoiding engagement with e-learners but, through the interview phase of participation as co-researcher in this project, becomes conscious of having suppressed that emotion: I recognise through this exercise...taping my feelings, that I have got feelings about online learning so I’ve decided that I’ve got to do something about it. TE3 adds: I don’t approve of my feelings there. I’m a wee bit ashamed of my feelings. During this phase of prompted self-reflection TE3 realises that feelings about tenuous relationships with e-learners have been suppressed and have also contributed to having a
negative disposition towards e-teaching, commenting: hopefully I’ll be able to work in a better way in the future now that I understand a wee bit more about how I feel working with people that I don’t know, have barely met, don’t really know what they look like. By way of marking a turning-point in self-reflection TE3 declares: having gone through this exercise it’s made me reflect on my practice as an online practitioner and I’ve found myself to be wanting. TE3 is highly motivated to support e-learners and decides to attack that which threatens self-efficacy, reasoning: If you can’t get control over the technology you’re not free to develop in terms of teaching and learning. Concerning actions taken since commencing participation as a co-researcher TE3 states: steps I’ve taken since starting on these audio files…I’ve tried to take steps to increase my knowledge-base because I think that’s one way of helping me to work better, and I’m not taking this lying down now that I’ve identified some of my emotion. I’ve tried to maybe analyse where they’re coming from… I am trying to put things in place. In time, and after many set-backs over developing strategies for emotion management and mastery of the use of e-tools, TE3 reaches the end of the planned period of participation as co-researcher feeling more confident as an e-teacher and perceiving growing self-efficacious working in the e-workplace.

V. DISCUSSION OF EMERGENT FINDINGS

Teacher educator co-researchers experience a mix of unequivocal feelings relating to working with or without confidence in e-workplaces, and ambivalent feelings relating to working with contradiction in e-workplaces. These feelings can be ascribed to themes that fall under either of two categories of the affective dimension of e-teaching: the affective dimension of interaction in e-teaching, and the affective dimension of being in e-teaching. The inter-relatedness of themes and categories of affectivity in e-teaching becomes apparent when co-researchers begin to interact with the researcher in a self-reflective turn on the data they have generated over several months. What also becomes evident is that in the welter of emotional processes generated over several months. What also becomes evident is that in the welter of emotional processes generated over several months, the affective dimension of e-teaching: the affective dimension of e-teaching, and categories of affectivity in e-teaching becomes apparent when co-researchers begin to interact with the researcher in a self-reflective turn on the data they have generated over several months. What also becomes evident is that in the welter of emotional processes generated over several months, the affective dimension of e-teaching: the affective dimension of e-teaching, and categories of affectivity in e-teaching becomes apparent. The answer to my main research question, how do e-teacher, teacher educators’ feelings relate to their work in online workplaces? is, of course, a complex one that defies a concise answer but it may be simplified in a three-part response that also summarises my responses to the first two research sub-questions. First, co-researchers are conscious of their actions, motives, reasoning and decision-making as e-teachers being influenced by their feelings about their e-work and their e-workplaces; second, that e-teachers’ consciousness of this cannot be assumed and that it may only enter consciousness after engaging in supported reflection with impartial but focused others; and, third, that negative as opposed to positive affective experiences characterise the interrelationships between cognition and emotion for e-teachers. My third sub-question remains unanswered: what needs to be done to ensure that e-teacher teacher educators experience great feelings and that great work accrues from such feelings? While this question stands as a considerable challenge to all working as e-teachers, to shy clear of the challenge would be academically negligent. Moreover, arguably, in these troubled economic times the effectiveness of teaching and learning can, much more than in recent history, be key factors in economic survival. Further research in response to that question is thus an academic and
economic imperative. The challenge has to be accepted and certainly by researchers.

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Kenny McIntosh is a lecturer in Language Education with the School of Education, University of Aberdeen, Scotland (e-mail: k.mcintosh@abdn.ac.uk).

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