

The Role of Personality in Education

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Editor's Note

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This is one of those posts where I don't have a firm conclusion, I'm just thinking some stuff through. I've been thinking a bit about what the role of personality is in education, particularly online and distance ed. In my own institution, The Open University, there has been a long tradition of removing the personal from teaching material. While the course materials we produce are written in an accessible manner, they are not imbued with one person's personality. Although one academic may write them, they go through multiple reviews, and editing. Course units are often attributed to the "The Module Team", or "written by X on behalf of the Module Team". The idea is that this is an objective view, created through collaboration to distill clear teaching material. The trouble with making them based around a personality is that this can be a barrier to accessing the content, if you don't respond well to that particular personality (but the opposite is also true, it can be a boost if you do like that person). When I joined the OU removing myself from the writing was one of the difficult aspects of learning to write distance ed material, while still keeping it engaging and not too 'dry'. I mean, who wouldn't want my personality stamped all over their units on Artificial Intelligence, right? (don't answer that).

Now, many of my more constructivist inclined colleagues will laugh at the idea that any teaching content can ever be objective, or that it isn't shot through with individual assumptions, cultural history, etc. This is true to an extent, but less so when you adopt a deliberate policy of writing from a collaborative perspective and specifically looking for cultural bias (this is always one of the aspects of peer review that we ask people to comment upon).

But then along come MOOCs, and they're all about the personality. Ironically, I find that cMOOCs, for all their intentions at being hierarchical and distributed, have a very strong cult of personality driving them. To be successful they often require someone with a well established online network to gather enough momentum, and because creating successful cMOOCs is hard work, that person usually needs to really be central in driving the course forward. And when this works well, it really does create a very engaging learning community. As you'll know, I'm a BIG FAN of Jim Groom, but it's hard to say that DS106 isn't a product of Jim's online personality. Indeed it is all about that, which is exactly why it's fun. Similarly, I think Dave Cormier's Rhizo courses are truly innovative and beginning to explore what a networked take on education might look like. But I think Dave's (loveable, cuddly) personality is a big factor in its success. And then there are xMOOCs with Rock star professors. There is even talk of actual rock stars (or film stars anyway) [presenting MOOCs](#).

This all takes place in the context of social media now of course, which wasn't the case with original OU material. Whenever I do my social media for academics sessions, I always stress that it's called social media for a reason, so put a bit of yourself in there. What I'm genuinely unsure about is the extent to which we should deliberately seek to place the learning process. If we remove it, learning can become dull and dry and possibly out of sync with the social media world it needs to operate within. But if we place too much emphasis on it, we risk highlighting the extrovert academic, the jokester, the good looking one, above academics with better subject skills. I'm just sharing my pondering here, not making a call one way or the other.



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