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The Emotification of Pedagogy: Bridging the Gap in Digital Learning

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Abstract

Traditional classroom learning has extended its cognitive transaction to the virtual mode. The increasing level of affective distance and emotional disconnection in the digital learning process has pointed out by many teachers and learners. According to David Krathwohl's taxonomy, affective domain along with cognitive and psychomotor domains are inevitable for meaningful learning. Virtual classrooms provide excellent content delivery with individual pace, but fail to transact emotional support to retain meaningful learning and character building. This study focuses on the emotification of pedagogy; the affective version of digital learning experiences; that is the purposeful incorporation of emotional intelligence and empathy in the pedagogy. The data were collected from 53 participants including both educators and students through a descriptive survey at Gandhigram Rural Institute Deemed to be University, Tamil Nadu through a Community of Inquiry Framework. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the factors influencing affective domain such as the emotional connection, meaningful participation, empathy, motivation and digital isolation; followed by qualitative reflections on digital learning experiences. The findings substantiate that how current platforms prioritize effective content transaction over emotional engagement that results a high prevalence of digital isolation. And propose emotional integration as vital in learning for significantly improving the learners' motivation and participation.

Keywords: emotification of pedagogy, affective domain, digital learning.

Introduction

The digitalized learning platforms accelerated the need for reconstruction of pedagogy in the virtual world. Although the synchronous learning along with learning management systems (LMS) has hit its zenith of technical efficiency and content accessibility, simultaneously precipitated an 'affective crisis' in the digitally mediated learning. This mechanical transaction of contents through digital interfaces lacks the gregariousness of traditional classroom environment. Cleveland & Campbell (2012) illustrate this phenomenon as the affective gap in the digital learning platforms that are inadequate to tackle the nuanced emotional indicators inherent in the face to face, traditional way of learning. This study concentrates on the emerging concept of 'Emotification' of digital pedagogy. That denotes the deliberate incorporation and strategic design of emotional intelligence and humanistic approach in digital pedagogy. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) explicitly stated that though cognitive boosters of online learning might have fascinate learners, they often undergo an intense feeling of digital isolation. Which crumbles the intrinsic motivation of the learner. The emotional well being of the learners neglected by the overemphasized digital content creation and optimization through various platforms like Google Classroom, Zoom, and

Canvas. In this digital world, learners are often considered as mere data point within a system. These online learning ecosystems track the cognitive achievement progress but neglect the affective, emotional part for meaningful learning.

Meaningful learning through authentic human connection in synchronous digital learning was the significant exploration of this study. Recent studies highlight emotional Intelligence as the core skill for an educator. Hence, this study reflects on the role of empathy, rapport, and social presence as the need of the hour in a digitally mediated classroom. Thus, to justify the demand for humanisation of the digital interface over mere content digitalization. The participants of the study observed certain humanising elements can bridge the affective gap in digital learning such as feedback through video opted for an alternate for face to face interaction in the virtual mode. In addition, strategic use of social icebreakers and informal digital language, emojis can strengthen emotional connection in the digital classroom. This study provides an idea on emotification of pedagogy for educators, curriculum developers and instructional designers.

Review of Related Literature

Contemporary educational researchers emphasize the inevitable role of affective domain with an effective transaction of cognitive process especially in digitally mediated learning environments. They pointed out the need for the incorporation of cognitive, affective and psychomotor development in the learning process (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). However, these studies mainly focused on the individual fragments of affective domain such as emotional presence, emotional intelligence, emotion regulation, and affective pedagogical design. Therefore, this review is intended to synthesis all the core aspects of affective domain in the learning process as emotification of pedagogy as an integrated construct to identify the research gaps for further investigation.

Pedagogical aspect of Emotional Foundations

Studies from the mid-2000s testifies that educational researchers recognised the essential requisite for meaningful learning encompasses cognitive process with emotional experience even in the digitally mediated learning environments (Arbaugh, 2005). In addition to this Zembylas (2007) used the concept of emotional ecology to reemphasise the inevitable part of affective, relational, and cultural aspects of pedagogy that leads to meaning making. Neuroscientific studies conducted by Yang and Damasio (2007) evidently demonstrated the integral part of emotion in reasoning and decision making that prioritise emotional foundations in pedagogy rather than supplementary to learning.

Need for Emotional Presence in Digital Learning

Digitally mediated education escalated the need for critically evaluate the role of emotional presence in the virtual learning environment. Cleveland and Campbell (2012) pioneered the studies based on the Community of Inquiry framework, validating the cognitive and social presence in the learning process. Later inquiries substantiate that emotionally responsive instructor behaviours such as tone, empathy, and immediacy reduce transactional distance and enhance learner engagement (Borup et al., 2015; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018). Control value theory by Pekrun (2014) provided deeper analysis on learners' emotions that moulds self-regulation and persistence in learning contributes a theoretical bridge between emotional experience and learning outcomes.

Pedagogical aspect of Emotional Intelligence and Regulation

Recent studies place emotional intelligence and emotion regulation as core pedagogical competencies. Educational researchers identify that instructors' emotional intelligence affects learner engagement and the quality of instructional outcome in online settings (Patel et al., 2023; Yin & Lee, 2024). Studies oriented on learners' perspectives similarly highlight emotion regulation as fundamental to resilience and sustained participation in digital learning environments (Calderon & Nieto, 2024; Mu & Li, 2025). These findings conjointly suggest that effective pedagogy requires intentional incorporation of emotion in the pedagogical design rather than reactive emotional support.

Emotional Engagement in the pedagogical design

The significance of affective domain in pedagogical design was elevated through digital story telling approach. Based on the studies done by Plass et al. (2020), pointed out that digital contents embedded in emotional design principles have been enhanced cognitive learning processing and meaningful participation in virtual classroom. In addition to this, studies deployed cinematherapy and narrative approach identified film and storytelling enriches reflection, empathy, emotional engagement that leads to professional resilience (Sacilotto et al., 2021; Chicó, 2024; Hicks et al., 2025). All these findings demonstrate the positive impact of deliberate implementation of emotification of pedagogy in the digital learning space.

The Concept of Emotification of Pedagogy in AI Era

Review of all the available studies inferred that most of the research are merely focused on the individual part of emotional aspects of learning. However, few studies contributed the term 'Emotification' as an integrated framework for the deliberate integration of emotional presence, emotional intelligence, and affective pedagogical design to humanise learning experiences (Dahlstrom, 2014. Hajas D, et al. 2020). In this AI era, more research on emotification of pedagogy significantly increased especially in hybrid or digitally mediated higher education contexts.

Table 1 Thematic Mapping of Literature on Emotification of Pedagogy

Theme	Key Studies	Core Contribution
Emotional foundations	Arbaugh (2005); Zembylas (2007); Immordino-Yang & Damasio (2007)	Established emotion as central to learning
Emotional presence	Cleveland-Innes & Campbell (2012); Borup et al. (2015)	Defined emotional presence in online learning
Emotional intelligence	Patel et al. (2023); Yin & Lee (2024)	Linked EI to instructional effectiveness
Emotion regulation	Calderon & Nieto (2024); Mu & Li (2025)	Connected regulation to resilience
Affective design	Plass et al. (2020); Chicó (2024)	Demonstrated design-based emotional engagement

Conceptual Framework: Emotification of Pedagogy

This study proposes an integral framework for emotification of pedagogy especially in digitally mediated learning, that encompasses its four dimensions such as emotional presence, emotional intelligence, emotion regulation, and affective pedagogical design. A holistic and synergistic approach on emotification of instructional practices foster emotionally sustainable, inclusive, and learner centred digital learning environments. Intentional connections and network ensure emotional presence in the learning process, whereas emotional intelligence develops in pedagogical reflections and emotion regulation supports learner resilience. Thus, emotion embedded affective pedagogical design enhances holistic development of the learner.

Present study pinpoints three research gaps for further exploration. Primarily, A unified operational framework for emotification of pedagogy that incorporates emotional presence, intelligence, and design under a single pedagogical construct is a necessity of the era. Furthermore, exploratory investigations on emotification of pedagogy are limited in teacher education context. Other than the western oriented studies, there exist a significant gap of Indian rural university contexts. For bridging these gaps, the present study positions emotification of pedagogy as an exploratory construct built on learner and educator experiences within digitally mediated learning.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are

1. To understand the emotional engagement and participation in the digitally mediated classrooms.

2. To Identify the most effective humanizing element that foster a sense of belonging and empathy.
3. To examine the correlation between emotification and learner motivation.
4. To measure the level of motivation and digital isolation experienced by learners in synchronous environments.

Research Methodology

This study utilised a mixed-methods approach. 53 respondents were selected using purposive sampling. 10% of the respondents were educators and the rest 90% was student teachers. The participants reported 1 to 3 years of experience with digital or hybrid learning. A survey tool consisted of 5 point Likert scale questions (1= Strongly Disagree, 5= Strongly Agree), multi-select categorical questions, and open-ended qualitative questions was used for this study. Data was collected online, focusing on the field of Education with Google Classroom and Zoom identified as the primary instructional platforms.

Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation

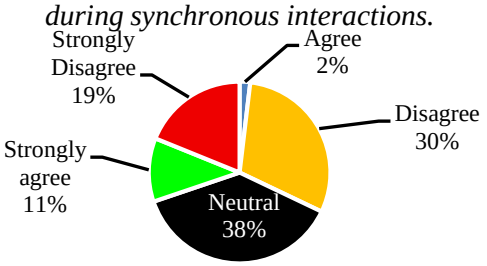
Data was collected based on the five key dimensions:

- *Demographics:* Role, Field of Study, and Experience.
- *Affective Experience:* Metrics on human connection and digital isolation.
- *Platform Evaluation:* Assessment of technical efficiency vs. emotional depth.
- *Humanizing Interventions:* Preferences for feedback and social tools.
- *Design Insights:* Qualitative feedback on the "Affective Gap."

Findings

The data were collected to measure the level of emotional engagement, participation, motivation and digital isolation in the digitally mediated learning environment through the survey questionnaire. Both Likert scale and open ended questions assessed the emotification factors in synchronous interactions. The results highlighted the need for empathy and emotification of pedagogy. Suggestions were given to eliminate digital isolation. Beyond cognitive and technological efficiency, human connection and meaningful learning were prioritised by the respondents. Analysis and interpretation of responses contribute empirical evidence for the need for the emotification of digital learning design.

Figure 1.
Felt an authentic human connection during synchronous interactions.



According to the data in Figure 1, the majority of individuals struggle to find emotional depth in digital communication, with 49% of participants reporting a lack of authentic human connection. While a large portion (38%) remains neutral, as if they view these tools like functional necessities than social outlets. A minority (13%) feels genuinely seen or connected through these platforms. The findings depict digital isolation in the synchronous learning environment. Although technology keeps us reachable, but fails to keep us truly connected.

Figure 2.
Digital platforms prioritize cognitive transaction over emotional engagement.

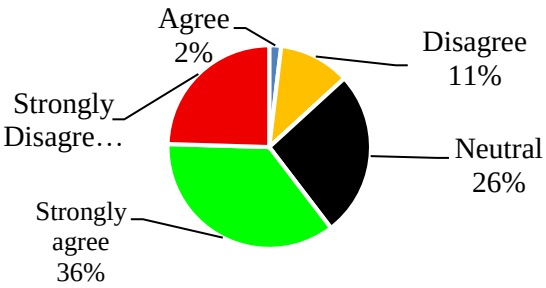


Figure 2 reveals the need for emotional engagement in the digitally mediated learning. 36% of

respondents strongly agree that digital platforms prioritize cognitive delivery over emotional engagement. Respondents opined that the optimized speed and data transmission of digital interfaces as emotionally sterile learning environments that fail to nurture rapport. As a result, majority of the learners in the synchronous mode feel functionally connected but emotionally alienated.

Figure 3.
convey empathy through text-based communication.

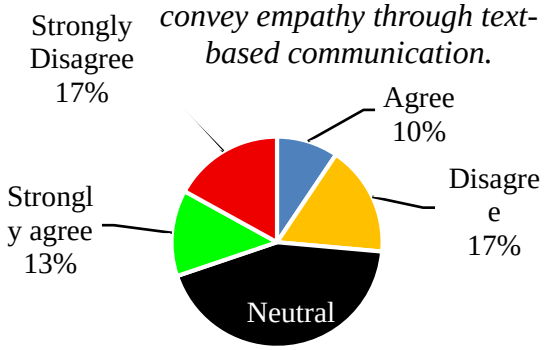


Figure 3 displays text based communication in the digitally mediated learning process lack empathy. 54% of the participants opted difficulty in expressing empathy through mere text based communication. Findings confirm with the Cues Filtered Out (CFO) theory, absence of cues such as facial micro expressions and vocal prosody weakens online communication. While 27% of respondents remain neutral, likely representing a cohort that has adapted to the functional limitations of text, only a marginal 23% feel that synchronous platforms can successfully sustain high levels of empathy. Consequently, the results suggest that while text-based tools are efficient for data transfer, they remain a lean medium that complicates the psychological labour of emotional understanding.

Figure 4. *The Emotification (integration of emotion) of pedagogy improves participants' motivation.*

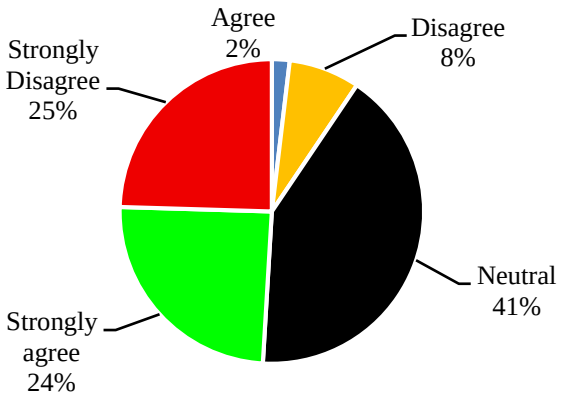
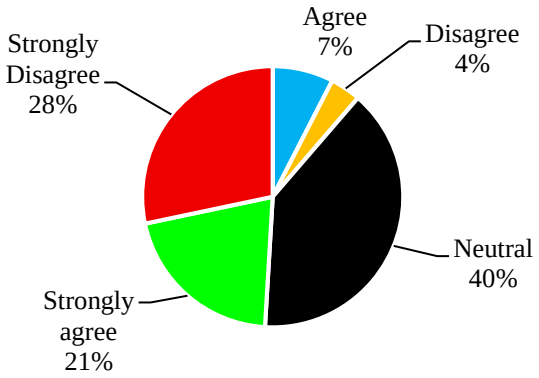


Figure 4 demonstrate a highly polarized response among students regarding the impact of emotional course content on their motivation, with an equal 24.5% saying they are either highly motivated or not motivated at all by emotional content in their lessons. The biggest group (41.5%) is neutral, suggesting that nearly half the students care more about the facts and the logic of the course than the emotional style of the teacher. Overall, because only about 26% of students gave a positive response, the findings show that emotional content is a helpful tool for some but isn't the main driver for the majority of the class.

Figure 5.
Digital Isolation experience in learning



Based on the data in Figure 5 regarding digital isolation, the largest segment of participants (40%) maintained a neutral stance, suggesting that for nearly half of the group, the frequency of isolation in digital settings does not significantly differ from face-to-face environments. The remaining population is heavily split at the extremes, with 28% of respondents strongly disagreeing that they feel more isolated online, while a notable 21% strongly agree that digital platforms increase their sense of loneliness. The findings indicate that digital isolation is a highly personal experience that varies for individual users.

Table 2 Digitally Mediated Learning and Learners' Emotional State

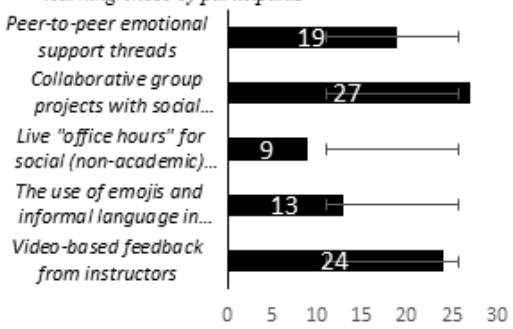
Variable	Mean (M)	Std. Dev (SD)	Interpretation
Technical Efficiency Priority	3.70	1.03	High agreement that platforms ignore emotion.
Motivation via Emotification	3.62	1.00	Strong correlation between emotion and effort.
Digital Isolation	3.58	1.17	Significant psychological barrier in online learning.
Authentic Human Connection	3.15	1.12	Moderate/Neutral; indicates a deficit in current tools.
Empathy Difficulty (Text)	3.11	1.17	Moderate difficulty perceiving empathy via text.

Preferred Humanizing Elements

Section II of the survey questionnaire consisted of 2 questions with multi-select responses revealed that participants prioritize social interaction and visual feedback.

- **Collaborative projects with icebreakers:** 50.9%
- **Video-based instructor feedback:** 45.3%
- **Emojis and informal language:** 39.6%
- **Peer-to-peer emotional support:** 37.7%

Figure 6.
Most effective humanizing elements in digital learning chose by participants



Among various humanizing elements shown in Figure 6, Collaborative group projects with social icebreakers were identified as the most effective humanizing element, opted by 27 out of 53 respondents. Video-based feedback from instructors ranked as the second most impactful intervention, with 24 out of 53 participants indicating its effectiveness in bridging the digital gap. Emotional support from peer group (19 respondents) and the use of emojis or informal language in interaction (13 respondents) were found to be moderately effective, while live social check ins were the least preferred at 9 out of 53.

3. The Role of Emotional Intelligence (EI)

A majority of respondents (49%) believe that Emotional Intelligence is Much more crucial in a digital environment compared to a traditional classroom, whereas 42% opined it is equally crucial. This underscores the demand for educators to possess digital empathy to overcome the lack of physical cues.

Figure 7.
Role of educators' Emotional Intelligence in a digitallt mediated classroom

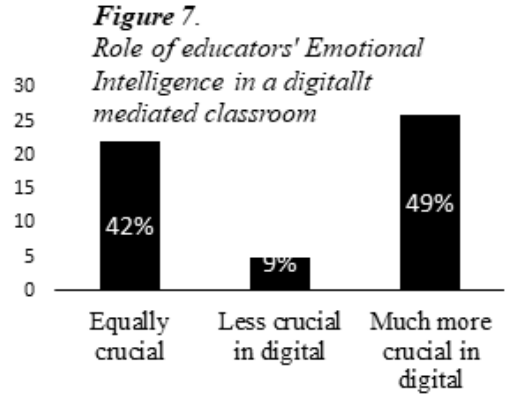


Figure 7 shows the perceived importance of Emotional Intelligence (EI) for digital educators. Almost half of the respondents (49%) assert that Emotional Intelligence is significantly more vital for digital educators than for those in traditional classrooms, highlighting a perceived need for emotification in virtual spaces. A substantial 42% of respondents view Emotional Intelligence as equally essential regardless of the medium, suggesting that core human connection remains a constant requirement in effective teaching. On the other hand, a minimal 9% of the cohort believes that Emotional Intelligence is less important in digital settings, indicating a near universal rejection of the idea that technology reduces the need for emotional awareness.

Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

Responses to the three open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis. An inductive, semantic-level approach was adopted to capture participants' explicit perceptions of the emotional dimensions of digital learning. After familiarization, initial codes were generated, clustered into themes, reviewed for coherence, and refined to represent shared meanings across responses. Non-substantive responses (e.g., Nil, Nothing, No) were retained for frequency awareness but excluded from thematic interpretation.

Theme 1: Absence of Empathy and Human Connection

For the first question's response, empathy came up as the most dominant and recurrent theme. Respondents consistently identified a lack of genuine human empathy, emotional connection, and face to face interaction as the single biggest emotional element missing in current digital learning platforms. Digital environments were frequently described as impersonal, performance driven, and overly focused on content delivery and assessment rather than learners' emotional states. Several respondents emphasized that platforms track progress and marks, but not feelings, resulting in learners feeling unseen, unsupported, and emotionally disconnected particularly during moments of struggle. This affective gap was also linked to diminished motivation, reduced engagement, and feelings of isolation. The data confirms a perceived Affective Gap With a mean score of 3.70, participants believe digital platforms are designed for content delivery than the experience of learning. This finding aligns with necessity of emotification of pedagogy in virtual spaces.

Theme 2: Personalized Emotional Check Ins and Supportive Feedback

In response to Question 2, participants suggested for an emotion aware design features to enhance learners' sense of being seen and supported. The most frequently suggested feature was a personalized emotional check in system, allowing learners to express their feelings and receive adaptive feedback, encouragement, or guidance. Related suggestions included empathetic dashboards, sentiment aware tools, personalized supportive feedback, and adaptive learning pathways responsive to emotional states. These features were perceived as mechanisms to humanize digital interfaces, foster emotional safety, and promote sustained engagement. A smaller subset of responses emphasized interface clarity, ICT facilities, privacy, and live or interactive learning scenarios, indicating that emotional support is closely intertwined with usability and trust. Emotification is not merely a nice to have feature; it is a functional requirement. The mean score of 3.62 suggests that when courses are humanized, student participation increases. Qualitative responses identified 'Genuineness' and Adaptive emotional check ins as missing links.

Theme 3: Emotional Impact of Digital Pedagogy

Responses to Question 3 reflected a dual emotional impact of digital pedagogy. On one hand, participants acknowledged positive outcomes such as increased flexibility, confidence, inclusion of shy learners, and enhanced well-being when emotional support is present. On the other hand, concerns were raised about technostress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, burnout (particularly among teachers), and

persistent feelings of isolation when emotional dimensions are neglected. Many respondents stressed that effective digital pedagogy must balance academic rigor with emotional well-being, emphasizing that emotions play a critical role in motivation, persistence, and meaningful learning. Despite being connected via high-speed internet and advanced LMS, learners report high levels of digital isolation (M=3.58). This suggests that technical connectivity does not equate to emotional presence (Anderson & Rivera, 2020).

Conclusion

This study highlights a clear requirement for empathetic, emotionally responsive digital learning environments. Participants articulated a strong expectation that future digital platforms should move beyond content centric models toward emotion integrated pedagogical design that supports empathy, belongingness, and emotional security alongside academic learning. The research concludes that the future of digital pedagogy lies in the transition from LMS (Learning Management Systems) to EMS (Emotional Management Systems) that includes an Integrate Emotion Check-ins (polls or sliders) at the start of modules to personalize the learning pace. Educators should prioritize video feedback over text to bridge the empathy gap. Hence, Educators should be trained in Digital EI to recognize signs of isolation and burnout in both asynchronous and synchronous learning environments.

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