SOCIAL ANXIETY – AN INCREASING CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATORS

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Abstract

The traditional lecture has evolved over many centuries, and much research has been done regarding the effectiveness of the traditional lecture. One of the major influences on the lecture format – is the evolving of technology, where books became available for the people, and the resources on the Internet became an interesting player in all educational work. What we as educators must also realise – is that not only the content, learning materials and technology has evolved or changed. Our students have also changed. This paper will discuss these changes with the results of a questionnaire as a basis. The questionnaire was published to around four hundred students, both online based students and campus-based students, and it was based on the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale. Two hundred and sixty-four students responded, and over 70% of these students score above 30, which indicates that social anxiety is probable. A somewhat unexpected result is that it applies equally to both groups of students, and the discussion in this paper will seek to explain these results.

Keywords: Online Education, Cyberpsychology, Social Anxiety.

1 INTRODUCTION

Moving educational offerings out of the traditional brick-and-mortar campuses has long been thought of as a case of just publishing the written material available for a course – on a website [1]. Online teaching has evolved from this rather simplistic view to a more complexed way of providing high-quality educational programs online, and in September 2017 33.1% of all students enrolled in Title IV institutions in the US, enrolled in a distance learning course [2]. Distance education that started by sending letters back and forth between student and learning institution, which evolved into online education, where, apart from emails they used forums as the only interaction and social learning activity, both being asymmetric ways of communicating. Today educators use a wide range of academic methods and learning activities such as live streams, social collaboration possibilities, virtual labs and pedagogically correct methodologies – both asymmetric and symmetric. The technology used in online education is also evolving at incredible speeds, and while Internet helped ease communication between only a few sites in the past – we will be surpassing 200 billion internet-connected devices by 2020 according to researchers [3]. While many studies have been done regarding the change and evolution in technologies used for online learning, research on how the students themselves might have changed or evolved remains sparse. Social anxiety causes mild sufferers to experience social apprehension, and in more severe cases, sufferers experience complete fear and avoidance – which, according to the authors of this paper will have an inevitable effect that we as educators must consider. This paper aims to discuss these effects by examining the results of a questionnaire published to around four hundred students, explain the results – and discuss how perhaps this must play an essential role for educators preparing to deliver courses in higher education programs.

2 SOCIAL ANXIETY

In pursuing their studies, many students have replaced the printed textbook with electronic versions, using search engines to gather information, searching for answers to questions, and watching online videos relating to the course material. These factors all contribute to a positive learning experience. However, when the time spent on the internet replaces the actual time spent on studies or completing school work, the students’ academic performance is affected [4]. Students might spend more time on social media, playing games, and casual surfing than they do with face-to-face interaction and spending time outdoors. Studies reveal that too much time spent online, can lead to students staying up late at night and being tired in class (online or physical campus) with lack of energy and concentration [4]. As the cycle repeats, this could lead to increased social anxiety in the students. Social anxiety or social interaction anxiety is the fear of social situations where the person is exposed to scrutiny, unfamiliar
people, environments and situations. The results of the anxiety manifest itself in an overall awkward and uncomfortable feeling to depression with the inability or fear to interact socially [5]. Mental illness such as Social Anxiety Disorder is one of the most common mental illnesses prevalent today. Social Anxiety is often confused with shyness due to lack of awareness and often goes undiagnosed and often not taken very seriously. As mental health problems, in general, are on the rise [6], anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the US according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) [7]. ADAA also deem persons with social anxiety as the second biggest group with diagnosed anxieties [8]. Research indicates that 85% of people suffering from Social Anxiety Disorder have problems with academic challenges [9]. When taking tests, studies found that test anxiety negatively affected the students' test results by hindering task-relevant processing and causes the learner to underestimate their competence [10]. In a study in 2004, Wetterberg found that 21% of seventeen-year-old school students in Sweden reported that social anxiety caused problems during their studies [11]. A fundamental aspect of to Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is a deep and real fear of being judged or portrayed in a negative light, feeling as if the student is diminished and ultimately rejected by others. The student usually has a preoccupation with how they are negatively portrayed by others, making them more awkward as they are intensely self-aware. The fear of being "exposed" as inept, weak or dull leads to extensive efforts to hide their true self [12]. In research discussing social compensation theory, researchers found that people with high social anxiety would and are extremely anxious in interpersonal relationships would gravitate more towards online activities, thus compensating for their lack of social skills. This gravitation towards excluding themselves from social or interpersonal relationships had the effect of adding to the problem. However, the studies also found that shy people, for instance socially awkward students, would use the online world to experience some social interactions and find likeminded friends since they find it more difficult in a physical face-to-face situation [13]. Getting the individual to interact in typical social situations is complicated since the student keeps away from interactions that are going to place them in an uncomfortable situation. Instead, the student sticks to familiar situations with likeminded individuals where they feel a sense of belonging. In this research, a survey was conducted with regards to social anxiety among students to highlight the challenges that educators must take into consideration when developing online courses.

3 METHODOLOGY

A small poll was published to online students to see whether mental health issues would play a role in choosing to study online. The questionnaire asked students to pick three of the reasons listed in Fig. 1 for choosing online studies over brick-and-mortar education.

![Figure 1. The poll response alternatives](image)

The Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS-CA) is used as a clinician-administered assessment of social anxiety [14][15], but there is also a self-report version (LSAS-SR) which has been shown to be valid as a screening tool for social anxiety [16] - and this study uses a Google questionnaire based on the LSAS-SR. The questionnaire describes twenty-four situations, and the subjects must then answer the two questions "What is your fear level in the described situation" and "What is your avoidance level in the described situation". The answer options are "None, Mild, Moderate, Severe" for the first question and "Never, Occasionally, Often, usually" for the second question, and they are given point scores from zero
(0) to three (3). A cut-off point of 30 indicates that social anxiety is unlikely, and a cut-off point of 60 indicates that social anxiety is probable. Scores above 60 indicate that social anxiety is very probable [17]. A group of students with acknowledged, either self or diagnosed, social anxiety was then interviewed to gain some more insights about the issues surrounding social anxiety in education.

4 RESULTS

This section will summarise the results from the three methodologies and the authors will discuss different essential aspects in the results.

4.1 The poll results

74 out of the 96 full-time students that got access to the poll, responded, giving a response rate of about 71%. As one can see in Fig. 2, 17.6% of the responders marks psychological health issues – which indicate that this is one of the primary reasons for many students to choose online studies over the more traditional campus-based studies, surpassing alternatives such as price and the possibility to start at other times of the year. This result indicated that psychological issues are something worth looking into regarding online education.

![Figure 2. Results of the poll](image)

4.2 The results from the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale questionnaire

Breaking down the responses to the questionnaire produces some expected results – such as the fact that acting, performing or giving a talk in front of an audience is the one thing both campus and online students fear the most (Fig. 3). This particular result is not surprising, considering speaking in front of an audience was the top fear listed in the Book of lists [18] surpassing a plane crash and death.
The responses also created somewhat unexpected results, for example, that the average fear-level was much higher than the average avoidance level among online students on that same question. (Fig. 4)

A reasonable explanation for avoidance levels being lower than fear levels among online students is that those students have already made an active choice to study by themselves online. This choice will, of course, remove or at least limit the chances of the online students finding themselves in the feared situations, and therefore they do not have to avoid them so much. Fig. 5 shows that the number of students that scores above the cut-off point of 30, indicating that social anxiety is probable, is above 70% for both cohorts which is a surprisingly high percentage and that the result indicates a similar problem among both campus and online students. The authors believe that this is due to the novelty of today's possibilities and technology and that we have yet to see the real effect of being constantly connected and communicate with family, friends, fellow students and teachers digitally rather than participating in face-to-face interactions.
Figure 5. Percentages above and below the cut-off point

That both the average fear and avoidance levels among campus students is higher than among online students are also surprising, and as one can see in Fig. 6, the average avoidance level among online students is slightly lower than the fear level.

Figure 6. Average fear and avoidance levels

The way digital natives are constantly connected makes it easier for them to hide away in the digital world, which, in turn, could increase the anxiety of social interaction because of minimal training in interpersonal skills. Bandelow and Michaelis state that it is more common for people with panic attacks to seek help because it is deemed as a physical illness rather than a psychological one [19] which indicate to the authors that people still find it difficult to admit to having psychological challenges. Conventional treatment for anxieties is to face your fears [20], but for people with social anxieties, seeking treatment for their condition would mean to expose themselves for in-person interactions before the treatment even starts [21]. Students who have chosen to study on campus could be aware of their challenges and have already decided to face their fears by going to campus. This decision might explain why the scores from campus students often are equal and, in some questions, higher than the online students, as they have come to terms with their situation and decided to do something about it. This explanation is further supported by the students interviewed.
4.3 The results from the interviews

Four students volunteered for interviews, two online students and two campus students. The interviewees were between twenty and thirty-four years old, two male students and two females. The most prominent similarity among the four interviewees is the complexity of their situation. None of them only suffer from social anxiety; they all have severe traumatic experiences from earlier in life, stretching over several years. Their experiences include violence, bullying, both psychological and sexual abuse and the effects are social anxieties along with a whole range of other anxieties and disorders. The one thing that separates the online students from the campus students is that both campus students report that they have decided to deal with their situation by facing their fears and force themselves to be socially active in a campus environment. The two online students mention nothing in that regard and appear to believe that the flexibility of the online environment is the main reason for their choice to study online. The unwillingness to regard social anxiety as a reason for choosing online studies supports the theory that students have difficulty admitting to psychological illness and that they consider having social anxiety a failure. Moreover, it also supports the theory that campus students are more aware of their situation and what needs to be done in order to overcome their challenges.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Many researchers have defined the millennials or Generation NeXt in different ways. While one can suggest that their increased exposure to online entertainment is the reason for them to think that education should be easy and fun, and therefore expect top grades without any effort [1], is a problem that educators must handle, there could be other reasons for lack of attention in class. Although Taylor [1] describes these students as "the least studious and the most academically disengaged cohort of students ever", having a severe case of social anxiety would in many cases also prevent students from paying attention. Not paying attention would affect the teacher's perception of the student negatively, which would again affect the psychological mindset of the student. This downward spiral will perhaps ultimately affect the motivation of the student to complete their studies. Researchers and educators have looked at different technologies and ways to push both online and classroom learning further. New technologies get pushed into their learning environment without too much thought about how technology would impact learners with mental disorders. Research shows that to understand the student and drive critical factors of student satisfaction; there needs to be a slight pause to think "How might this technology affect the student?" Not just positively, but also perhaps negatively. Additional empirical research into how specific learning technologies affect Social Anxiety Disorder sufferers could lead to breakthroughs in treatment or improvements to build learning frameworks that take these learners into account.

REFERENCES


