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Redefining the Practice of Teaching and Learning

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## **CONTENTS**

Introduction	iii
Foreword by Assistant Rector	iv
Foreword by Course Coordinator	vi
List of Title & Participants	vii

VSTL30	<b>TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT TO WORKPLACE WRITING</b> Dr. Nurul Kamalia Yusuf	110
VSTL31	<b>APPLICATION OF INTERNET-BASED TOOLS IN INTEGRATED ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS CLASSES FOR OPEN/ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)</b> Siti Mariam Mohammad Iliyas, Siti Aishah Taib, Maisarah Noorezam, Nadzrah Sa'adan	114
VSTL32	<b>EMOTIONAL CAPITAL AND 'CARE' PRACTICES IN E-LEARNING: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE</b> Nuramira Anuar	118
VSTL34	<b>TEACHING &amp; LEARNING VISUAL AIDS: POWERPOINT AND VISIBILITY</b> Chen Ai Hong, Saiful Azlan Rosli, Cosette Yoon Wey Hoe	122
VSTL35	<b>LEVEL OF MOTIVATION IN PROJECT-BASED LEARNING OF JKE STUDENTS IN POLISAS</b> Lian Ai Fang, Marliana Binti Mahamad, Kafiza Binti Ahmad Kamaruzzaman	126
VSTL36	<b>GENDER DIFFERENCES IN STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS MATHEMATICS AT UITM TERENGGANU</b> Zamzulani Mohamed, Ruzaidah A. Rashid, Nazuha Muda @ Yusof, Zokree Abdul Karim	130
VSTL37	<b>EFFECTS ON IMPLEMENTATION OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) AND OPEN-ENDED LABORATORY (OEL) FOR WATER ENGINEERING LABORATORY</b> Nora Farina Mohd Halim, Doris Asmani Mat Yusof, Nur Muizzah Nawi	134
VSTL38	<b>NEEDS AND POTENTIAL USE OF AUGMENTED REALITY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING COMPUTER ARCHITECTURE AND ORGANIZATION COURSE: A PILOT STUDY</b> Anis Salwani Binti Abu Bakar, Hasliza Binti A Rahim @ Abd. Rahman, Noraini Binti Desa	138

## Emotional Capital and ‘Care’ Practices in E-Learning: A Theoretical Perspective

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### Abstract

We are witnessing augmented movements in Higher Education recently- especially in that of online learning and in the case of UiTM, Open Distance Learning (ODL), which has accelerated tremendously. In terms of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), both educators and learners are experiencing isolation due to physical distancing to help curb the pandemic which results in emotional distress especially in e-learning environment. Many research studies focus on how to best support both the educators and students especially in terms of technology and the use of technology in teaching and learning, but little research studies have delved into the aspects of emotional labour and ‘care’ in e-learning especially during this crisis. In this neoliberal era, this aspect of ‘care’ could sometimes be neglected and failed to be at the forefront in teaching and learning in HEIs. This theoretical paper will discuss Bourdieuan social theory especially emotional capital, and how it relates to online teaching and learning practices in a crisis. It is hoped that by stressing on emotional capital and care in teaching and learning practices, both educators and students could be better supported in e-learning environment during this crisis and beyond.

Keywords: Bourdieu, social theory, emotional capital, higher education, online learning

### Introduction

Movies such as ‘Dead Poets Society’, ‘Freedom Writers’, ‘Good Will Hunting’ and ‘The Blind Side’ are not only entertaining, but also have important lessons educators could learn from. One of the unifying themes in these movies is ‘faith’ that the inspiring teachers have in their students despite the challenges that their students and the teachers themselves are facing in their lives. It is moving to see the emotional investment and care that the teachers have on their students beyond the syllabus delivery. Also, as teaching and learning have been overhauled due to the COVID-19 crisis, education providers on the other hand were trying to provide platforms to continue their teaching and learning as well as assessments to best support the students. In response to the pandemic, the Malaysian Ministry announced ‘Movement Control Order (MCO) for Malaysians to help control the spread of the fatal disease. In short, in terms of higher learning, the pandemic has changed the way we understand and experience learning.

Online learning is not a novel practice in Malaysia. We have been introduced to flipped classes and blended learning that compliment face-to-face learning since the year 2000. Reactions and acceptance to online learning have been mixed since the implementation—to many who are complacent with face-to-face learning, to dive into the virtual unknown, could present hesitation, to some degree. During these neoliberal times, the issue ‘experience’ in particular ‘emotions’ of the educators and students as active agents in teaching and learning are often neglected and disregarded to some extent- in order to fulfill these neoliberal concerns and agenda.

In the context of Higher Education, e-learning is accelerated due to the recent COVID-19 crisis. Research studies in education have been conducted on how to improve and support the use of technology in teaching and learning targeting both educators and students; however, the element of affective concerns are still unexplored or presents significant dearth in the literature. In particular, the ‘emotions’ that are experienced by both educators and students should be explored and supplemented

Copyright © 2020 Virtual Symposium on Teaching and Learning (VSTL2020) e-proceeding. with care practices- and in this context, this paper will be discussing the roles of emotions and care in e-learning environment during a crisis. Highlighting the agents of 'emotions' themselves- educators and students, who use the technology is vital and therefore, theoretical insights into the subject should be explored.

### Habitus, capital and field in the digital sphere

Bourdieu's social theory has been applied in education extensively; however, in education technology, specifically in Malaysia is limited. As the theory has successfully shed light to various educational issues, it is hoped that the theory could potentially do the same in online teaching and learning. This theoretical paper will apply his toolkits- habitus, capital and field to look into online teaching and learning. Previously, these concepts have been applied widely in social research studies especially in education. With the rising use of technology in teaching and learning, the social theory could also be applied to the contemporary digital teaching and learning. In this section, I would attempt to operationalize Bourdieu's thinking tools in relation to online teaching and learning.

Field is the arena where the various elements are happening and experiences. First, the notion of field according to the French sociologist is arena where structure and agency interact. Like any other fields, higher education is a field site on its own- with its own 'rules' and the agents have to 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and play it well to navigate this particular field. During this time— how higher education itself and the mechanics have changed drastically from it was before, this change of fields inevitably affects not only the structure (Bourdieu, 1987), but also how the agency now and the students and educators are navigating and experiencing higher education. For example, in a particular context, e-learning, the field would be the various online platforms. In addition to that, the crisis that we are in is a field in itself where 'emotions' are experienced.

Next, habitus is the dispositions that are based on one's experiences, which are not static, and it is always changing with one's everyday life experiences. Habitus are influenced by our backgrounds – notably familial and educational. Thus, this also means that habitus is highly dependent on the cultural backgrounds that one is raised in (Bourdieu 1987, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and thus, culture then also influences how we feel and react to 'emotions'.

Social capital, cultural capital and economic capital are not exclusively separate, but rather transformational and transferrable from one capital to the other (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). First, economic capital means wealth or material goods that a person has, which is also transferrable to other capitals. In relation to the e-learning, this refers to a person's access to material goods which enhances online learning such as computers and mobile phones, as well as access to good Internet connection or WiFi set up at his or her respective residences. Second, social capital refers to access to people that may benefit people for their advancement. In applying this to e-learning, social capital here could refer to students and educators who have the advantage in terms of social relations to others in their network who help them in some ways with access to knowledge or infrastructure relating to their online learning.

Third, cultural capital refers to the qualifications and information that a person possesses. Cultural capital categories include: objectified, institutionalized and embodied. Objectified cultural capital means material possession a person has. Next, institutionalized cultural capital refers to qualifications and credentials that one has received. Last, embodied cultural capital refers to culture internalized by a person through their habitus, for example through his or her taste or accent. Cultural capital here refers to any prior on ongoing classes or training that a person has that would give an advantage to the person, in this case, to online learning. For example, this could refer to knowledge of qualifications in the Internet, technology, software or other relevant online-related learning that could give an upper-hand to the users.

### Emotional capital and 'care' in e-learning

Emotions can influence the way individuals process their thinking and the way they are behaving. The importance has become more relevant especially in today's neoliberal climate. In terms of the concept of capital, emotional capital could then be defined as an embodied cultural capital. Ahmed (2004) suggested the notion of "affective economies" which are freely circulated. In relation to that, the aspect of 'care' is an equally imperative affective element in any human relationships (Noddings, 1984). Noddings (2010) also stressed that although caring is experienced universally; this could be expressed in varied ways due to cultural backgrounds. Hence, the habitus and field of where the teaching and learning take place play vital roles in studying the affective elements.

Diane Reay (2004) and Helga Nowotny (1981) have introduced and developed the concept of emotional capital from Bourdieu's existing concepts of capital (cultural, economic, social and symbolic). In addition, according to Reay (2004), emotional capital can be accumulated through social relationships and distributed amongst family members. Compared to other capital, emotional capital portrays, arguably, a particularly gendered capital in which women are often perceived to have more emotional capital than men, and it is performed more often in private (a sphere implicitly gendered as 'feminine') than publicly (Nowotny, 1981). In a study conducted by Reay (2004), she explored mothers' involvement in their children's schooling experience and found that mothers are much invested in their children's academic attainment and emotionally affected by this.

Furthermore, Damasio (1994) stressed on the stressed emotions in human experience. In terms of learning motivation, emotion plays a crucial essence for the students' academic performance (Artino, 2009; Artino & Stephens, 2006). Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) found in their study on emotional presence and online learning that emotions should be recognized by the learners as it would facilitate their online learning experience. However, as reported in the news, young people and students are the ones who are affected the most by the COVID-19 outbreak (Cao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). According to a recent study on college students' mental health during the COVID-19 crisis by Cao et al. (2020), it was found that the students have experienced anxiety and the causes include economic instability and changes in their academic and daily life routines. The same study also stressed on the importance of support from their families, friends and HEIs. Therefore, e-learning platforms as the specific fields play an important role to teaching and learning.

Emotions indeed play a vital role in human experience in teaching and learning. Thus, in relation to the issues discussed, 'care' practices in e-learning environment, especially during a crisis, where both students and teachers are experiencing to some extent isolation and emotional stress, then should be approached differently by educators compared to face-to-face classes. For example, educators could reach out to the students in a more proactive manner to ensure that their students are doing well not only in their studies, but also in other areas in their lives that could potentially affect their performance. Besides that, educators could also design more collaborative projects for the courses, and this would encourage the students to work with one another, which in turn would increase the sense of connectedness despite the physical distance from each other. These issues related to 'emotions' should be highlighted to positively influence the students' e-learning experiences.

### Conclusion

Teaching and learning on e-learning platforms involve many intricacies and nuances- physical, mental and emotional factors. As Bourdieu's social theory has established its applicability in research in educational studies, and as discussed in earlier- albeit with some points of concerns outlined, it is hoped that future researchers in education, especially in e-learning would apply some aspects of emotions and care practices in their research studies. By looking beyond the 'physical' aspects- the teaching and learning themselves and pedagogical and curriculum design aspects of e-learning, these 'emotions' and 'care' practices in play would benefit by adding the missing important element to understand learners and learners' experiences in future research studies.

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