Conference Presentation: Research-informed approaches to Teaching Online

I was delighted to share some of my ideas about research-informed online teaching at the NAWE conference. My talk was well attended with seventy people watching it live. It is now on the NAWE website as a video talk.

Since the 2000s, I have been using videos and online platforms like blogs in my teaching. As a school teacher in a large secondary school until 2015, I created websites to bring together all the vital information about the topics I was covering. Wordpress blogs are particularly good at marshalling together multiple sources of information, and providing you as a teacher a chance to offer your views and strategies. You can see my blog about William Blake here: https://williamblakereloaded.wordpress.com/ It includes the YouTube videos I made where I perform and sing Blake's poems, and also analyse them. I cannot pretend to be a great singer or songwriter at all, but I improvised music around Blake's poetry as a way of showing my pupils (and others) that creative writing can be played with, interpreted and performed.

At the beginning of my NAWE workshop, I used puppets to tell a story which illustrated my key points about teaching online. I cannot pretend to be expert puppeteer or storyteller, but I offered my show in the spirit of playfulness. In Figure 1 you can see my 'inner princess' – the person in me who desires to be perfect – meeting the magic wizard who the princess wants to solve all her problems with teaching online.

Figure 1 My inner princess meets the online wizard who will solve all my problems.

Sadly, the wizard disappears and my inner princess falls down the 'learning pit': the place where learners get stuck. There, she meets a devil, who represents her doubts.

Figure 2 The princess meets her inner demons

The rest of my talk involved my inner princess learning about all the solutions that could help her climb out of the learning pit.

While this opening to my talk might seem rather naive, substantive research shows that when teachers turn their explanations into stories, then their students remember their central points much better. Glonek & King write:

> Teachers should not apologize for using their storytelling skills in class nor should they feel that their students are always best served by covering large quantities of expository material in a PowerPoint presentation. (2014: 40)

Stories are great ways of assembling disparate bits of information and presenting them in a meaningful, motivating and memorable fashion. They are what Deleuze & Guattari would call 'assemblages' (2004) – bits of stuff brought together into a dynamic whole. They 'territorialise' information – give a grounding, offer a landscape – but they also afford their audience 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: xvi): a chance to find their own flow, to escape from someone else's story and find their own one. I suggest in my talk that a good way of territorializing your thoughts/feelings about online teaching and find your own 'line of flight' is by starting a learning journal about your

experiences. Such a journal should be professional in focus but also deeply personal (Bolton 2006). It should be full of things like 'venting'. Figure 3 illustrates what venting involves.

Figure 3 Venting drawing by the author

Another way of more precisely exploring your feelings is by drawing a circumplex which psychologists use to itemise how people's affect (their emotions) (Tseng 2014). Figure 4 is a circumplex I made to show the vital emotions involved in everyday life.
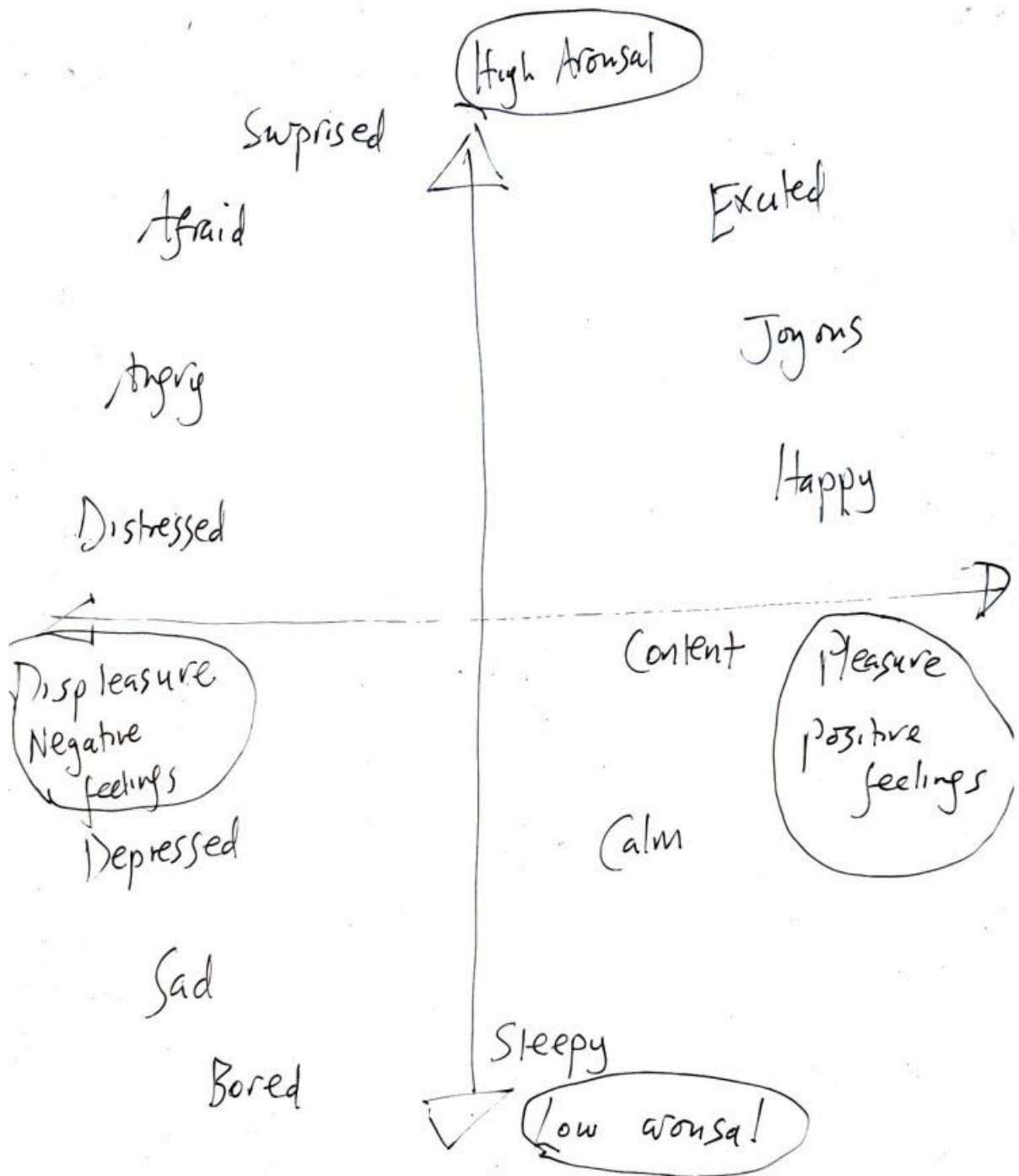
Figure 4 The author's drawing of a circumplex

Figure 5 is my circumplex about online teaching.

Figure 5 My circumplex about online teaching

You can see that 'high arousal' and pleasure in me is generated by positive student feedback, but high arousal 'displeasure' by negative feedback. Both generate a great deal of energy, but in different ways. So, the thing here is to consider how best to use this energy. I argue that as an online teacher you must take a 'Growth Mindset' approach (Dweck 2014) to online teaching as opposed to a 'Fixed Mindset'. The two approaches are outlined in the following table:

Fixed Online Teaching Mindset	Growth Online Teaching Mindset
I'll look stupid if I say I don't know how to do it	I'll learn from discussing things that confuse me
I must never make any mistakes	Learning from my mistakes will help me improve
I can blame people and situations if I don't succeed	By understanding how other people and situations affect me, I'll become more aware of what helps me and what does not
Either you have that ability to operate the technology and teach online or you don't	I can learn and grow as a teacher all the time, no matter how old I am: taking the right attitude towards the technology will help me
Better to give up rather than suffer from stress	There will be stressful times, but with a mindful approach, I will acknowledge and accept my feelings and this will help me relax in the long run
These online classes are complete nightmares	These online classes are challenging, but I'll discuss them with colleagues and experiment with some different strategies if things don't work out
Reflecting upon practice is a complete waste of time, it will just stress me out	Actually I can learn a great deal from reflecting and analysing my practice

This is probably the most important point I made. With teaching online, you are always going to fall into the 'learning pit' (Figure 6). There will be times when you want to give up because it is such a new and challenging area in so many ways. Trying things out, learning from your mistakes is the way to improve. This is how technically accomplished people become technically accomplished.

Figure 6 Falling Down the Learning Pit

During the rest of presentation, I offer some research-informed strategies for developing meaningful online learning, which included Hew's excellent research into what works with Massive Open Online Courses (2016) and Laurillard's seminal ABC method of designing online learning (2012: ABC Learning Design 2020). Please watch the video presentation for more on this.

My central advice is to adopt a Growth Mindset to online teaching. This is easy to say, but difficult to carry out in practice because it is a tricky, contentious and stressful process, fraught with many issues. But it is being aware of your emotions and learning to respond in a way that will help you grow as a person and a teacher which ultimately helps the most. This is what the research really shows.

References

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