

Teaching the social psychology of interpersonal relationships in an online setting

Catherine Talbot & Madeleine Pownall

Research demonstrates the pedagogical value in stressing the ‘real world’ applicability of subject-specific content in a psychology programme. The move to online teaching prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic has given way to more creative uses of technology to enhance the student experience. In this paper, we demonstrate the value in applied approaches to teaching psychology content, in a way that acknowledges and responds to students’ lived experiences. We share a case study of an online seminar, in which students first reflect on their social connections in an online context, before participating in a mock interactive experiment that demonstrates the theory of proximity and familiarity in developing interpersonal relationships. The use of creative, interactive methods to connect social psychology theory to students’ lived experiences of learning during Covid-19 may be a useful avenue for future teaching.

Keywords: Online teaching; social psychology; Covid-19; distance learning.

RESEARCH DEMONSTRATES that students engage well with information when it is presented in an applied way, i.e. when the relevance of subject-specific content to the ‘real world’ is made clear to students (Tomcho & Foels, 2017). This notion has prompted a plethora of creative approaches to stress the ‘applied’ aspect of psychology content (e.g. Cranney et al., 2011; Cranney, 2013; Dunn et al., 2011; Taylor & Hulme, 2015; Mair et al., 2013). These approaches typically stem from the increasingly popular pedagogic concept of ‘psychological literacy’, which broadly refers to the capacity for psychology graduates and students to use their subject-specific knowledge to address global, personal, and societal problems (Mair et al., 2013). Psychological literacy is an approach to psychology teaching that stresses the ‘real world’ application of psychology subject-specific content. It is also highly valued in undergraduate psychology policy and standards; for example, ‘an understanding of real-life applications of theory’ is a core graduate attribute of a psychology programme, according to the British Psychology Society’s accreditation standards (2019, p.9; see also APA, 2013).

The pedagogical benefits of helping students to understand the ‘real world’ impact of the theories and concepts that they learn in their degree is clear. However, some scholars have also raised concerns about the ability to use novel and creative teaching methods to engage students with applied content during the pivot to temporary online teaching prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic (Chu, 2020).

Indeed, the pedagogical impact of the shift to online teaching provision must be carefully evaluated, particularly in light of claims that Higher Education is unlikely to return to its pre-Covid-19 state of ‘normality’ (Kalantzis & Cope, 2020). Over the past year, scholars have shared ‘best practice’ guidance for education during Covid-19, focusing on facets such as best practice in online teaching (Bao, 2020; Nordmann et al., 2020), transitions to university during COVID (Pownall et al., 2021), and student mental health (Baloran, 2020; Grubic et al., 2020). Importantly, the majority of these recommendations stress the importance of providing students with the opportunity to make social connections alongside their academic studies.

As well as the concerns about the capacity of online teaching to engage students meaningfully with applied content, there have also been reports of students struggling to make meaningful social connections with other students in an online context. For example, Elmer et al. (2020) notes how students in a Swiss university reported more anxiety, loneliness, and ‘fears of missing out on social life’, which was prompted by social isolation as a result of Covid-19. Moreover, in a general population, Nitschke et al. (2020) show how social connectedness in a Covid-19 context is associated with lower levels of perceived stress and worry. This is problematic, given that social connections with peers is a key predictor of adjustment to university (Maunder, 2018), retention (Wilcox et al., 2005), sense of belonging (Pittman & Richmond, 2008), and student success (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Similarly, research shows how having a support network of friends at university contributes to students’ increased confidence and security about their own self-image (Brooks, 2007) and having a social network of peers can buffer against academic stress (Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Therefore, efforts to enable social connections, coupled with efforts to stress the applied nature of psychology content, should be useful in the Covid-19 context. Recent research demonstrates that psychology students are struggling, both academically and personally, due to the shift to online teaching prompted by Covid-19 (Usher et al., 2020).

Here, we share a case study of a seminar that was designed to foster students’ engagement in the application of social psychological theory, whilst also developing students’ ability to reflect upon their experiences and peer social connections simultaneously. This approach is informed by Bachik and Kitzman’s (2020) notion that undergraduate psychology curricula would benefit from explicitly embedding the values of personal development, in order to help students’ mental health and academic engagement. The authors make a compelling case for the embedding of ‘personal development

topics’, such as emotion regulation, self-reflection and stress-reduction into undergraduate programmes, noting how these topics are notably absent from teaching in psychology, despite psychologists’ expertise in these areas (see also Panuesky et al., 2015). Our case study provides one relatively light-touch example of how to begin to embed a concern for students’ lives beyond their academic studies into the curriculum, by offering one example of how this may be achieved in a one-hour academic tutorial.

Context

Here, we describe and reflect upon a one-hour stand-alone seminar that was designed, developed, and implemented as part of a BSc Psychology undergraduate degree in a UK-based university in the south of England in the 2020–2021 academic year. The seminar was delivered as part of the Introduction to Social Psychology Unit to 380 students in the first year of their three-year undergraduate programme and was designed to be delivered in an online teaching context. Seminar groups consisted of approximately 36 students and were delivered via Zoom. Although some educators have expressed concerns about digital competencies inhibiting student’s ability to engage with online teaching (e.g. Nordmann et al., 2020), the seminar took place in the second semester, at which point students had substantial experience using Zoom for their learning.

Note that ethical approval was not sought for this practice exchange piece, because we report here reflections upon our online teaching practice, rather than findings from empirical research.

Class structure

Our seminar was preceded by a pre-recorded social psychology lecture and live question and answer session on interpersonal relationships, which aimed to introduce students to the core content. The lecture covered factors that have been identified as important in forming interpersonal relationships: physical attractiveness (Lemay et

al., 2010); similarity (Gonzaga et al., 2007); proximity and familiarity (Reis et al., 2011). In the discussion of proximity and familiarity, students were introduced to the repeated exposure effect (Zajonc, 1965; Moreland & Topolinski, 2010), which suggests that the more often a person is exposed to a new stimulus the more favourable their evaluation tends to become. Relevant empirical research by Moreland and Beach (1992) and Reis et al. (2011) was then discussed, before students were introduced to criticisms of the importance of physical proximity. To stress the relevance of this theory, social media was used as an example of how interpersonal relationships and attraction can develop without being physically close to a person. In the lecture, students then considered how social media as a means of developing proximity is particularly relevant during Covid-19 times, when digital spaces moved from an amenity to a necessity (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

The small-group seminar then built upon the ideas, concepts, and theories that were introduced in the accompanying lecture and specifically focused on the importance of proximity and familiarity. The aim of this seminar was twofold. Firstly, we wanted students to critically reflect upon the importance, relevance, and validity of the 'proximity and familiarity' factor model of interpersonal relationships, whilst actively applying their knowledge from the lecture. Secondly, we aimed to give students the opportunity to simultaneously develop their interpersonal relationships with one another, given the lack of social connections prompted by Covid-19 in their studies to date. Below, we outline the seminar content.

Part one: reflecting on interpersonal connections

We began the seminar by discussing how first-year students are in a unique position to consider interpersonal relationships, given the Covid-19 context. We then explained how the psychological literature shows that connecting with other students is useful in aiding the transition to university (Pownall et al., 2021; Talbot et al., 2020), which led to a

brief class discussion about the challenges of developing meaningful social connections in an online teaching context. In the seminar, students are then asked to spend 10 minutes writing a short paragraph about their experiences of cultivating interpersonal connections with other students since starting university. Specifically, students were asked to consider the following prompts: how the pandemic has impacted their connections with other students; what is missing in online interactions that would help form connections offline; whether 'physical proximity' is important in developing interpersonal relationships as a student. Following this period of writing and reflection, students were then invited to share their experiences with the class and the seminar leader facilitates a brief discussion about shared experiences and reflection. This practice of reflective writing as a tool in psychology learning reflects other recent accounts (e.g. in clinical psychology; Falgares et al., 2017).

Part two: demonstrating the repeated exposure effect

The second half of the seminar focused on the importance of familiarity in forming interpersonal relationships, specifically the repeated exposure effect (Zajonc, 1965). In line with the notion of psychological literacy, this half of the seminar was designed to be a novel, 'hands on' way of demonstrating to students how the social psychological theory that they learn in lectures can be 'adaptively and intentionally [applied] to meet personal, professional and societal needs' (Cranney et al., 2012, p.4). To apply this subject-specific knowledge, we adapted Reis et al.'s (2011) experiment to the online classroom. In Reis et al.'s (2011) study, pairs of participants took it in turns to ask and answer either two or six questions. One participant ('Partner A') would ask the question, then the other participant ('Partner B') would provide an answer for 30 seconds. Then, Partner B would ask the same question of Partner A, and Partner A would respond for 30 seconds. This process continued until all questions

had been asked and answered by both participants. Questions included: ‘what are your hobbies?’; ‘what would you like to do after graduating from [name of university]?’; ‘what is something you have always wanted to do but probably never will be able to do?’; ‘if you could change anything that happened to you in high school, what would that be?’; ‘what is one thing about yourself that most people would consider surprising?’; ‘if a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, your future, or anything else, what would you want to know?’. In the original study, these findings supported the repeated exposure effect (Zajonc, 1965), indicating that familiarity leads to interpersonal attraction.

After recapping this study briefly, students were then randomly assigned into pairs and put into breakout rooms in pairs on Zoom. Students were instructed to note down how ‘connected’ they felt to their partner on a scale of one to 10 when they enter the breakout rooms. They were reminded that they did not have to share this rating, and the instruction stressed that this judgement was for their use only. Students then took it in turns to ask and answer two questions: ‘what are your hobbies?’; ‘what would you like to do after graduating university?’. Students were informed that they should spend one minute answering each question and they should use all of the time available. The seminar leader then sent reminders via the Zoom breakout room announcement feature, to ensure that the time was split evenly and both students had a chance to answer the questions.

After bringing students back from the breakout rooms, the leader then instructed students to rate how connected they now feel to their partner on a scale of one to 10 and students asked to consider whether this rating had changed. This procedure in its entirety was then repeated with different pairs of students, to enable students to meet more of their peers. For the second iteration of the procedure, this time students are told to ask and answer four questions: ‘what

are your hobbies?’; ‘what would you like to do after graduating from university?’; ‘why did you decide to study psychology?’; ‘if a crystal ball could tell you the truth about your future, what would you want to know?’. As before, students were then brought back to the main room and asked to reflect on whether they noticed any differences in levels of connectedness between the two conditions and what factors they thought were important.

Typically, in the seminar, students shared that their ratings of connectedness to their partner increase substantially as the questions are asked, which demonstrates the familiarity aspect of interpersonal relationships theory. This then led to a lively discussion about the value of familiarity and proximity as a model of interpersonal relationships, which engaged students with the content that is taught in the accompanying lecture. In this sense, the lecture content was ‘brought to life’ in the seminar, and actively applied to students’ own lived experiences. This approach has been discussed throughout the literature; for example, Nathan and Poulsen (2004) explain how active involvement in ‘interpersonal experiences’ can enhance practical understanding of psychological theory. While an active embedding of this approach has been discussed in depth in applied professional areas, such as clinical psychology (Falgares et al., 2017); here, we suggest that there may be value in encouraging active involvement and an appreciation of lived experience in introductory undergraduate teaching too.

Reflections

Overall, this innovative method of teaching the psychology of interpersonal relationships online provided a good way for students to apply the knowledge from their lecture. By encouraging the students to reflect on their experiences of interpersonal relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic, we were able to make the lecture content relevant to their experiences and, therefore, more relevant to the students as learners. This is a helpful

way of teaching core social psychological content, while also encouraging community building among students. Students fed back that they appreciated this opportunity to connect with their peers, as they had not previously had the opportunity to socially connect with their fellow students. This reflects other literature which demonstrates that students struggle to make meaningful connections with other students online (e.g. Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Students commented that while they had opportunities to discuss academic work in other seminars, there had been limited opportunities to get to know each other socially and they missed the conversations that happen in classrooms before and after the class starts, an aspect of university life they identified as being important for informing connections with their peers (see also Ali & Smith, 2015). Students felt that our seminar enabled them to develop their connections and foster a sense of community among the students. Similarly, after the seminar students seemed to leave with a good level of understanding of the core social psychology theories (i.e. repeated exposure theory) that formed the basis of the seminar. Anecdotally, students' good level of understanding and engagement with the content appeared to be facilitated by how the content was taught in a way that made the practical application clear to student's own lived experiences. Therefore, this suggests that other core social psychological theories (such as social identity theory, stereotype threat theory, or self-affirmation theory) may also be taught in a similar way, to facilitate student's comprehension of taught content while also serving secondary functions in the student experience.

Despite these benefits, students did face some challenges, primarily relating to digital accessibility, in that some students struggled to engage meaningfully with the seminar due to internet connectivity issues. For example, this seminar, as with all online teaching, assumes that students have access to good internet and working a microphone; however, this may not be the case for everyone. From our

interactions with students, we know that some students have reported feeling anxious about speaking in seminars. However, it is possible that encouraging students to speak to each other one-to-one (rather than in front of the group) may have reduced feelings of anxiety. Seminar demonstrators did report that a small number of students left the Zoom call when they were told they would need to speak to each other; however, this was a minority of students and in our experience is often the case in seminars that require students to speak. This echoes the literature which suggests that students' engagement with teaching delivered on Zoom is a challenge for educators (Serhan, 2020). This suggests that while the seminar may have been beneficial for the vast majority of students in facilitating interpersonal connections, it is not a complete or sustainable replacement for in-person peer connections. In the future, interviews could be conducted with students to further understand students' experiences of this seminar and identify ways in which their learning experiences could be improved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we designed a seminar that encouraged students to apply their knowledge of interpersonal relationships to their own experiences and develop their peer-to-peer connections. The seminar was well-received, whereby students reported that the seminar filled an important 'gap' in their experience of transitioning to university, by enabling them to socially connect with one another. In future, we aim to develop this work by applying it to the offline teaching environment and using this opportunity to reflect on differences in student experiences, using data generated from the classroom to inform our ideas. This seminar structure could also now be used to demonstrate to students other more nuanced aspects of interpersonal relationships, such as focusing on wider societal and cultural factors to improve students' intercultural competence (Mak, 2012).

Catherine Talbot

Bournemouth University

Madeleine Pownall

University of Leeds

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Catherine Talbot, ctalbot@bournemouth.ac.uk

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