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Affective capture in digital school spaces and the modulation of student subjectivities

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ABSTRACT

Educational environments are increasingly using online technologies that aim to identify and manage students through affect. These forms of monitoring can be understood as a method of approaching students through the lens of positive psychology. Clearly, the relationship between schools, technology, and affect is not straightforward or benign. Yet, despite recent attention to the educational benefits of social and emotional intelligence, most educational discussions pay little critical attention to affect in terms of external interests regulating the behaviours and dispositions of students. This paper examines how student subjectivities are managed by the modulation of affect through online platforms in/for school. It is separated into three broad sections that capture the themes emerging as central to the relations between student populations and techniques of affectivity: *sensation, intensity, and value*. The paper concludes with a consideration of the implications that arise from how online technologies are used to mediate student subjectivities in secondary school.

1. Introduction

The emergence of internet technologies is a significant influence on student experiences of school. One notable shift has been how affect circulates between student bodies in the online/offline spaces that constitute the contemporary educational environment. Dominant online platforms in schools profoundly shape the emotions of students. The ways in which these platforms are used in/for school, therefore, underpin the production of student subjectivities. As such, platforms are not simply sites where information is transmitted or exchanged between teachers and students. Instead, they have become key in shaping students' dispositions, values, beliefs, and behaviours.

These issues map onto a wider 'affective turn' in education systems over the past 20 years or so (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). In many countries schools are now expected to show due attention to the wellbeing and positive emotional health of students. One prominent focus has been supporting the development of students' social and emotional intelligence, fixing on qualities such as empathy for other people, and the ability to regulate one's own emotions. Conversely, fitting with the recent austerity drive in faltering Western economies, emphasis has been placed on the development of student 'resilience,' 'grit', and 'buoyancy'. All told, schools have been impelled to demonstrate a commitment to fulfilling what Williamson (2012) refers to as 'emotional-cultural' imperatives alongside the 'technical-economic' imperatives traditionally seen to shape educational practices. In this context, digital technologies are framed as a means of positively influencing students' affective capacities.

As such, educational environments are increasingly using online technologies that aim to identify and modulate student affect. Schools in the digital age, it would seem, are now expected to be as 'high touch' as they are 'high tech' (Williamson, 2012). For example, *ClassDojo* allows teachers to see into the classroom through a mobile digital application which promotes a form of positive surveillance, making every child's emotions the constant objects of scrutiny. These modes of affective monitoring can be understood as 'psychopedagogy' - a method of approaching students through the lens of positive psychology (Williamson, 2015). Clearly, the relationship between schools, technology, and affect is not straightforward or benign. Yet, despite increasing focus on the benefits of social and emotional intelligence, most educational discussions pay little critical attention to affect in terms of external interests regulating the behaviours and dispositions of students.

Recent scholarship in the social sciences and humanities has begun to move understandings of affect away from psychological

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accounts of individually determined emotions. Affect is now also seen as co-produced by individuals and their social contexts, both online and offline. Papacharissi (2015), for example, explores how online platforms support networked structures of emotions. Affective capacities are mediated through digital technologies that connect individuals to each other and allow them to make collective sense of the world through narrative undertakings. Kuntsman and Karatzogianni (2012) examine the politics of emotion and affect in the context of digital technologies, claiming that affective structures bridge the actual and the digital-virtual. Garde-Hansen and Gorton (2013) conceptualize online media as affectively laden spaces, embedded with a range of "networked tools that can be used by emotion agents to transmit affect" (p. 4). On this view, online platforms have the potential to create emotional noise that can spread both horizontally (e.g., across email and social networks) and vertically (e.g., journalism, print media) to move groups through affect.

In focusing on the emotions of school technology use, this paper draws theoretically from Massumi's (2002) framework of affect as a flow of intensity between bodies that is expressed subjectively and socially as emotions and/or actions. Massumi sees affect as both anchored in an individual subject and running between and through bodies. More specifically, affect comprises non-signifying, non-conscious, and pre-personal intensities, whereas emotions are subjective and structured expressions of these affective sensations. Affective intensity can be understood as "capture and closure" of which emotion is the most functional articulation of that capture: "It is intensity owned and recognized". Emotion as a dimension of affect is "the sociological fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (p. 28). Emotions can also alter in intensity as they move within and between individuals and groups, a collective process that Massumi terms 'affectivity'. These modulations in emotions have political consequences – e.g., affect can be amplified to compel individuals to behave in ways that are not necessarily intentional or consciously chosen. Crucially, then, affect is a useful concept for explaining both conscious and non-conscious aspects of why people do things, particularly how people's actions and dispositions are shaped by dominant ideological and political influences (Leys, 2011).

Against this background, the present paper builds on existing research that examines the role affect plays in exchanges between people, computational devices, and software (Sumartojo et al., 2016; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Thrift and French, 2002). It seeks to contribute to a social-scientific understanding of how the development and uptake of mood tracking applications are gradually shifting from society more broadly into educational institutions. More specifically, it explores how student subjectivities are shaped by the modulation of affect through online platforms, and how students continue to engage in subversive/resistant behaviours despite attempts made to manage them.

The paper is separated into three sections that capture the themes emerging as central to the relations between student populations and techniques of affectivity:

i) Sensation – "materiality of technologies at the core of networked affect along with the interrelations among human and nonhuman bodies as they "inhabit" networked digital media";
ii) Intensity – "oscillations, reverberations, and resonances of affective intensity and the connections and disconnections that such intensity brings forth on online exchanges";
iii) Value – "networked communications as sites of immaterial and affective labour, analysing the creation and accumulation of value and the complex ways by which affective value ties in with political economy, human agency, and the networked technologies with which many of us now daily engage" (Hillis et al., 2015, p. 14).

The primary question that drives this research is: How do internet platforms act as conduits for the circulation of affect between student bodies and student spaces? The paper concludes with a consideration of the implications that arise from how online technologies are used to mediate student subjectivities in secondary schools. If we are genuinely interested in obtaining a comprehensive understanding of students and their experiences of digital schooling, then the entanglement of students, affect, and online/offline spaces is an important area for analysis.

2. Research method

The studies that inform this paper revolve around digital technology (non)use within three secondary schools in the state of Victoria, Australia. These schools were selected to ensure diversity in relation to key factors such as population density and characteristics such as ethnic and cultural background, levels of educational achievement, and socio-economic status. The schools included an inner-city school located in a highly-populated urban area with considerable polarization in terms of education, income, and ethnic/cultural diversity; a city school located in a suburban area with considerable polarization in terms of education, income, and some ethnic diversity; and a rural school located in an area with a low population density and high levels of poverty in some parts.

Using a classic school ethnography approach (Delamont, 2014), strategies such as interviews, observations, extended field notes, and document and policy analyses were employed to gain understandings of how students negotiate digital spaces. Observational research took place along a continuum from non-participatory observations through to participation in some classes. Unstructured observations and field notes were made in and around the schools. At the time of writing, fieldwork included over 300 site visits; 500 h of observations; interviewing and general 'hanging around'; participating in lessons, meetings, and other school-related activities such as open houses, art shows, and assemblies; taking photographs; making video and sound recordings; and exploring the schools' online systems and other digital spaces. These activities generated a substantial corpus of empirical data, only a small sample is identified in this paper. Observations and ten student focus group interviews were used as primary sources of data collection for the present paper. The size of the focus groups ranged from four to eight students at a time. Preliminary interview topics explored in general digital technology use/non-use in school. Initial examinations drew on a thematic analysis of our larger corpus of data, structured by the following research questions: What are students, teachers, administrators, and leaders claiming to use digital technology for in schools? How is this use and non-use patterned? What are the consequences and outcomes of this (non)use of technology? Follow-up focus-group interviews were conducted in order to obtain richer accounts of digital affects as an emergent theme. An interview schedule was developed to ensure specific areas were addressed in each focus group. Group discussions varied in duration from thirty minutes to two hours.

3. Modulatory power

The paper's theoretical understanding of digital affect is grounded on Massumi's notion of affect which encompasses the intensities of manifested sense perceptions, including those that might not have been named by specific feelings or emotions