

The Psychology of Virtual Relationships Provides Solutions to the Challenges of Online Learning: A Pragmatic Review and Case Study from the University of Birmingham, UK

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Abstract : There has been a significant drive to use online or hybrid learning in Higher Education (HE) over recent years. HEs with a virtual presence offer their communities a range of benefits, including the potential for greater inclusivity, diversity, and collaboration; more flexible learning packages; and more engaging, dynamic content. Institutions can also experience significant challenges when seeking to extend learning spaces in this way, as can learners themselves. For example, staff members' and learners' digital literacy varies (as do their perceptions of technologies in use), and there can be confusion about optimal approaches to implementation. Furthermore, the speed with which HE institutions have needed to shift to fully online or hybrid models, owing to the COVID19 pandemic, has highlighted the significant barriers to successful implementation. HE environments have been shown to predict a range of organisational, academic, and experiential outcomes, both positive and negative. Much research has focused on the social aspect of virtual platforms, as well as the nature and effectiveness of the technologies themselves. There remains, however, a relative paucity of synthesised knowledge on the psychology of learners' relationships with their institutions; specifically, how individual difference and interpersonal factors predict students' ability and willingness to engage with novel virtual learning spaces. Accordingly, extending learning spaces remains challenging for institutions, and wholly remote courses, in particular, can experience high attrition rates. Focusing on the last five years, this pragmatic review summarises evidence from the psychological and pedagogical literature. In particular, the review highlights the importance of addressing the psychological and relational complexities of students' shift from offline to online engagement. In doing so, it identifies considerations for HE institutions looking to deliver in this way.

Keywords : higher education, individual differences, interpersonal relationships, online learning, virtual environment

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