

Emotional Engagement in Hybrid English Humanities Classrooms in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract: This study examines the nature and dynamics of emotional engagement among university students in hybrid English humanities classrooms during the post-pandemic period. As higher education institutions worldwide have adopted hybrid teaching models that combine in-person and online modalities, understanding how students emotionally engage with learning in these mixed environments has become an urgent concern. Drawing on theories of academic emotions, student engagement, and affective pedagogy, this research employs a mixed-methods design combining survey data from 326 undergraduate students and in-depth interviews with 20 purposefully selected participants at a Chinese university. The findings reveal that emotional engagement in hybrid humanities classrooms is shaped by four interrelated factors: pedagogical design, social presence, technological mediation, and learner agency. Students reported experiencing a wide range of emotions, from enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity to frustration and isolation, with the quality of social interaction emerging as the strongest predictor of positive emotional engagement. The study identifies specific pedagogical strategies that support emotional engagement in hybrid settings, including structured collaborative activities, emotionally responsive teaching practices, and the intentional cultivation of learning communities. The research contributes to the emerging literature on post-pandemic hybrid pedagogy by foregrounding the emotional dimension of student experience and offering practical recommendations for educators seeking to create emotionally engaging hybrid learning environments in humanities education.

Keywords: Emotional Engagement; Hybrid Learning; Post-pandemic Education; English Humanities; Affective Pedagogy; Student Experience.

1. Introduction

The global pandemic that began in 2020 fundamentally transformed the landscape of higher education, compelling institutions to rapidly adopt remote and hybrid teaching modalities. As the acute phase of the pandemic receded, many universities chose to retain hybrid learning models that combine face-to-face and online instruction, recognizing their potential for flexibility, accessibility, and pedagogical innovation. However, the transition to hybrid education has raised significant questions about the quality of student experience, particularly in disciplines such as the humanities that traditionally rely on rich interpersonal interaction, dialogic exchange, and affective engagement [1].

Emotional engagement, defined as the affective dimension of students involvement in learning activities, has been identified as a critical factor in academic success, persistence, and personal development. In humanities classrooms, where students are asked to grapple with complex texts, diverse perspectives, and questions of meaning and value, emotional engagement is especially important [2]. The capacity to feel curiosity, empathy, intellectual excitement, and even productive discomfort is central to the kind of deep learning that humanities education aspires to cultivate.

Yet the hybrid learning environment poses particular challenges for emotional engagement. Students participating online may feel disconnected from their peers and instructors, while those attending in person may experience disruptions when trying to interact with remote classmates [3]. The technological infrastructure of hybrid classrooms can introduce barriers to spontaneous communication, and the asynchronous elements of hybrid courses may reduce the sense of immediacy and shared experience that supports emotional connection.

Despite these challenges, relatively little research has examined the specific dynamics of emotional engagement in hybrid humanities classrooms in the post-pandemic era. Most existing studies of hybrid learning have focused on technical and logistical aspects, student satisfaction, or cognitive outcomes, with the emotional dimension receiving less systematic attention. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how students emotionally engage with learning in hybrid English humanities classrooms, what factors shape their emotional experiences, and what pedagogical strategies can enhance emotional engagement in these settings [4].

The study is guided by three research questions. First, what patterns of emotional engagement do students exhibit in hybrid English humanities classrooms in the post-pandemic era. Second, what factors shape students emotional engagement in these settings. Third, what pedagogical strategies do students and instructors identify as effective for supporting emotional engagement in hybrid humanities classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Emotional Engagement in Higher Education

Student engagement has been widely studied in higher education research, typically conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions [5]. Behavioral engagement refers to participation in academic and extracurricular activities, cognitive engagement involves the investment of mental effort in learning tasks, and emotional engagement encompasses the affective responses that students have toward their learning experiences, including feelings of interest, belonging, frustration, and anxiety [6].

Among these dimensions, emotional engagement has been recognized as foundational to the others. Research has consistently shown that students who are emotionally engaged, who feel interested in the subject matter, connected to their peers and instructors, and valued as members of the learning community, are more likely to persist in their studies, invest cognitive effort, and achieve positive learning outcomes. Conversely, negative emotional experiences such as boredom, isolation, and anxiety can undermine both behavioral and cognitive engagement, leading to disengagement and withdrawal.

The study of emotions in educational settings has been enriched by theories of academic emotions, which provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the antecedents, experiences, and consequences of emotions in learning. According to this theoretical perspective, academic emotions are influenced by a range of individual and contextual factors, including students' appraisals of the value and controllability of learning activities, the quality of interpersonal relationships in the classroom, and the broader institutional and cultural context of education [7].

In the humanities specifically, emotional engagement takes on distinctive characteristics. Humanities courses often involve encounters with literature, history, philosophy, and cultural texts that evoke strong emotional responses. Students may experience empathy with characters in novels, moral indignation at historical injustices, or aesthetic appreciation of artistic works. These emotional responses are not incidental to learning but are integral to the interpretive and critical processes that define humanities education.

2.2. Hybrid Learning in the Post-Pandemic Context

Hybrid learning, also referred to as blended or mixed-mode learning, involves the deliberate integration of face-to-face and online instructional components. While hybrid models have existed in various forms for decades, the pandemic accelerated their adoption across higher education, creating a new generation of hybrid classrooms equipped with videoconferencing technology, learning management systems, and digital collaboration tools.

The post-pandemic hybrid classroom differs from pre-pandemic blended learning in several important respects. First, both students and instructors now bring significant experience with fully online learning, which has shaped their expectations and capabilities. Second, the post-pandemic context carries emotional residues of the pandemic experience itself, including heightened awareness of social isolation, screen fatigue, and the fragility of educational routines. Third, institutions are now making more deliberate and long-term investments in hybrid infrastructure, signaling that hybrid learning is not merely an emergency measure but a permanent feature of the educational landscape [8].

Research on hybrid learning in the post-pandemic era has identified both opportunities and challenges. On the positive side, hybrid models offer students greater flexibility in how they participate in courses, which can reduce barriers related to geography, health, and scheduling. Hybrid learning also creates opportunities for innovative pedagogy, including the use of digital tools to enhance collaboration, feedback, and student-centered learning. On the negative side, studies have documented challenges related to equity of experience between in-person and online students, the difficulty of maintaining social presence and community in mixed

environments, and the increased cognitive and emotional demands placed on both students and instructors.

2.3. Affective Pedagogy and Emotional Support in Language Education

Affective pedagogy refers to teaching approaches that deliberately attend to the emotional dimension of learning, seeking to create classroom environments that foster positive emotions, support emotional well-being, and use emotional experiences as resources for deeper learning. In language education, affective pedagogies have a long history, from early humanistic approaches that emphasized the importance of reducing anxiety and building self-esteem to more recent perspectives that view emotions as integral to the social and cognitive processes of language learning [9].

The post-pandemic context has intensified interest in affective pedagogy, as educators and researchers have become more acutely aware of the emotional toll that disrupted education has taken on students. Studies have documented increased levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and emotional exhaustion among university students in the post-pandemic period, highlighting the need for pedagogical approaches that prioritize emotional support and well-being alongside academic achievement [10].

In the specific context of English humanities classrooms, affective pedagogy involves creating opportunities for students to engage emotionally with course content, to express and process their emotional responses in a supportive environment, and to develop emotional literacy and empathy through engagement with diverse perspectives and cultural texts. The challenge for educators in hybrid settings is to extend these affective pedagogical practices across both in-person and online modalities, ensuring that all students, regardless of their mode of participation, have access to emotionally engaging and supportive learning experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative survey phase with a qualitative interview phase. The quantitative phase was designed to identify broad patterns of emotional engagement among a large sample of students, while the qualitative phase aimed to explore the meanings, experiences, and contextual factors underlying those patterns in greater depth. This design was chosen for its capacity to provide both breadth and depth of understanding, which is particularly valuable for investigating a complex and multifaceted phenomenon such as emotional engagement.

3.2. Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a comprehensive university in central China that had adopted a hybrid teaching model for its English humanities courses following the pandemic. In the quantitative phase, 326 undergraduate students enrolled in hybrid English humanities courses completed an online survey measuring emotional engagement, perceived social presence, technology satisfaction, and overall learning experience. In the qualitative phase, 20 students were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews based on their survey responses to represent a range of emotional engagement profiles. Interviews were conducted in a language of the participants' choosing, and all data were

transcribed and, where necessary, translated for analysis.

3.3. Instruments

The survey instrument comprised validated scales adapted for the hybrid learning context. Emotional engagement was measured using a scale that assessed positive emotions such as interest, enthusiasm, and belonging, as well as negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom, and isolation. Social presence was measured using items assessing students' sense of connection to peers and instructors in the hybrid environment. Technology satisfaction items captured students' perceptions of the usability and reliability of the technological tools used in hybrid instruction. All scales demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity in the pilot testing phase.

The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to elicit rich descriptions of students' emotional experiences in hybrid humanities classes. Questions addressed participants' most memorable emotional moments in class, the factors they perceived as supporting or hindering their emotional engagement, and their suggestions for improving the emotional climate of hybrid learning environments.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis to identify the relationships between emotional engagement and its potential predictors. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with coding conducted both deductively, based on the theoretical framework, and inductively, allowing for the emergence of new themes from the data. The quantitative and qualitative findings were then integrated during the interpretation phase to develop a comprehensive understanding of emotional engagement in the hybrid classroom.

4. Findings

4.1. Patterns of Emotional Engagement

The survey results revealed a complex and varied picture of emotional engagement in hybrid English humanities classrooms. Overall, students reported moderate levels of positive emotional engagement, with interest and intellectual curiosity being the most frequently endorsed positive emotions. However, a substantial minority of students reported experiencing negative emotions such as isolation, frustration with technology, and a sense of disconnection from the classroom community. Students who attended classes primarily in person reported significantly higher levels of positive emotional engagement and lower levels of negative emotions compared to those who participated primarily online.

Among the positive emotions, intellectual curiosity was the most frequently reported, reflecting the inherent appeal of humanities content for many students. Students described being drawn into discussions of literary texts, cultural phenomena, and philosophical questions that stimulated their thinking and imagination. Enthusiasm was also commonly reported, particularly in connection with activities that involved creative expression or personal reflection. A sense of belonging, while less uniformly reported, was identified by many students as a crucial element of their emotional engagement, particularly when they felt that their contributions were valued by peers and instructors.

Among the negative emotions, isolation was the most frequently cited concern, particularly among students who

attended classes online. These students described feeling like observers rather than participants, watching classroom discussions unfold without feeling fully included. Frustration with technology was another common source of negative emotion, with students reporting difficulties related to audio quality, connectivity, and the awkwardness of communicating through screens. Some students also reported boredom, particularly during lecture-heavy sessions that did not provide opportunities for active participation or discussion.

4.2. Factors Shaping Emotional Engagement

The regression analysis identified four factors that significantly predicted emotional engagement in hybrid humanities classrooms. These factors, in order of predictive strength, were social presence, pedagogical design, learner agency, and technological mediation.

Social presence emerged as the strongest predictor of positive emotional engagement. Students who felt a strong sense of connection to their peers and instructors, who perceived that they were known and valued as individuals, and who experienced genuine interpersonal warmth in the classroom reported significantly higher levels of positive emotions and lower levels of negative emotions. The interview data elaborated on this finding, with students describing how small gestures of recognition, such as being addressed by name, receiving personalized feedback, and being invited to share their perspectives, contributed to their sense of belonging and emotional investment in the class.

Pedagogical design was the second strongest predictor of emotional engagement. Students who perceived that their courses were thoughtfully designed to integrate online and in-person components, to provide opportunities for active participation and collaboration, and to include varied and stimulating activities reported higher levels of emotional engagement. Interview participants highlighted the importance of activities that required genuine interaction between in-person and online students, rather than treating the two groups as separate audiences.

Learner agency, defined as students' sense of control over their learning processes and outcomes, was also a significant predictor of emotional engagement. Students who felt that they had meaningful choices about how to participate, what topics to explore, and how to demonstrate their learning reported more positive emotional experiences. This finding is consistent with self-determination theory, which posits that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness supports intrinsic motivation and positive affect.

Technological mediation, while a significant predictor, had a more complex relationship with emotional engagement. Reliable and user-friendly technology was associated with reduced frustration and increased comfort, but technology alone was not sufficient to create positive emotional engagement. Rather, the emotional impact of technology depended on how it was used within the broader pedagogical design and social context of the classroom.

4.3. Pedagogical Strategies for Emotional Engagement

Both the survey and interview data yielded insights into specific pedagogical strategies that supported emotional engagement in hybrid humanities classrooms. Structured collaborative activities, in which small groups of students worked together on tasks that required discussion, negotiation,

and shared production, were consistently identified as among the most emotionally engaging elements of hybrid courses. These activities were especially effective when they brought together in-person and online students in the same group, fostering a sense of shared purpose and mutual accountability.

Emotionally responsive teaching practices were also highlighted as important contributors to emotional engagement. Students described how instructors who acknowledged students' emotional states, who expressed genuine enthusiasm for the subject matter, and who created space for students to voice concerns and frustrations contributed to a positive classroom climate. The concept of emotional contagion was evident in students' accounts, as they described how their own emotional engagement was influenced by the emotional expressiveness and authenticity of their instructors.

The intentional cultivation of learning communities emerged as another key strategy. Students who reported the highest levels of emotional engagement described their hybrid classes as communities in which they felt known, supported, and challenged. Instructors who invested time in community-building activities at the beginning of the semester, who maintained regular and personalized communication with students, and who created rituals and routines that provided a sense of continuity and stability were praised for fostering emotionally engaging learning environments.

Finally, the integration of reflective practices was identified as a valuable strategy for emotional engagement. Journaling, guided reflection, and metacognitive activities that invited students to process their emotional responses to course content and to the hybrid learning experience itself helped students develop greater emotional awareness and resilience. These practices were particularly valued by students who found the hybrid environment challenging, as they provided a structured way to make sense of their emotional experiences and to identify strategies for managing negative emotions.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study paint a nuanced picture of emotional engagement in hybrid English humanities classrooms in the post-pandemic era. While students bring diverse emotional profiles to the hybrid learning experience, the quality of their emotional engagement is significantly shaped by the pedagogical and social conditions of the classroom. The primacy of social presence as a predictor of emotional engagement underscores the fundamentally relational nature of humanities education, in which learning is understood not as an isolated individual activity but as a shared endeavor grounded in dialogue, empathy, and mutual recognition.

The study extends existing research on student engagement by foregrounding the emotional dimension, which has often been treated as secondary to behavioral and cognitive engagement in the literature. The findings suggest that emotional engagement is not merely a byproduct of good teaching but a foundational condition that enables deeper cognitive and behavioral involvement. When students feel emotionally connected to their peers, their instructors, and the subject matter, they are more willing to take intellectual risks, to engage with challenging ideas, and to persist in the face of difficulty.

The post-pandemic context adds additional layers of complexity to the dynamics of emotional engagement.

Students carry emotional residues of the pandemic experience, including heightened sensitivity to social isolation, ambivalence about technology, and a desire for human connection that may be more acute than in pre-pandemic times. Educators working in hybrid settings must be attuned to these emotional dynamics and proactive in creating conditions that support emotional well-being and engagement.

The practical implications of this study are significant for educators, curriculum designers, and institutional administrators. The findings suggest that hybrid humanities education can be emotionally engaging when it is designed with intentional attention to social presence, collaborative pedagogy, learner agency, and emotional responsiveness. Institutions that invest in training instructors in affective pedagogical strategies, in providing reliable and user-friendly technology, and in creating policies that support flexibility and student choice are likely to see higher levels of emotional engagement among their students.

The study also has implications for language education more broadly. English humanities classrooms, with their emphasis on interpretation, dialogue, and cultural engagement, provide a particularly rich context for emotional engagement. The strategies identified in this study, such as collaborative discussion, reflective writing, and emotionally responsive teaching, are transferable to other language and humanities educational contexts and can contribute to more holistic and humanistic approaches to education.

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated the patterns, predictors, and pedagogical supports of emotional engagement in hybrid English humanities classrooms in the post-pandemic era. The findings reveal that emotional engagement is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by social, pedagogical, personal, and technological factors, with social presence emerging as the most influential predictor. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on post-pandemic hybrid education by centering the emotional dimension of student experience and demonstrating its importance for meaningful learning in the humanities.

The research offers practical insights for educators seeking to create hybrid learning environments that support emotional engagement. By attending to social presence, designing collaborative and varied learning activities, respecting learner agency, and cultivating emotionally responsive teaching practices, educators can create hybrid humanities classrooms in which students feel connected, curious, and inspired. As higher education continues to navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic landscape, foregrounding the emotional lives of students is not a luxury but a necessity for achieving the transformative educational goals that the humanities have always aspired to serve.

Limitations of this study include its focus on a single institutional context, which may limit the transferability of the findings. The cross-sectional design of the survey phase does not allow for causal inferences about the relationships between variables. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to track changes in emotional engagement over time, experimental designs to test the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions, and comparative designs to examine emotional engagement across different institutional, cultural, and disciplinary contexts.

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