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**UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF
EMPATHY IN SYNCHRONOUS MULTIMEDIA
CONFERENCING**

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the internet, teachers and learners are reshaping how interaction in distance education occurs. These changes are being further stimulated through the integration of relatively new online collaboration tools such as synchronous multimedia conferencing (SMC). A central and, as yet, not fully explored component of social interaction within this context is the ability to empathise, or interpret the internal frame of another. The importance of the ability to empathise is that it is an essential relational mechanism for effective social interaction and learning. The intent of this research was, therefore, to promote understanding of the nature and function of empathy in synchronous multimedia conferencing (SMC).

The exploratory research undertaken was embedded within a hermeneutic perspective and guided by the hermeneutic lens of Gadamer (1975, 2001). It explored conferencing participants' heuristic understandings of *how* they experienced empathy within SMC. Utilising a qualitative case study methodology, participants were engaged within an iterative dialogical research strategy that enabled the development of understandings over time. The purposeful selection of two case studies consisting of two separate distance education classes, were the foci of the investigation. Data were collected from repeated one on one and focus group interviews spread over a six-month period. The strategy enabled participants to reengage with their own and others' understandings as these developed within a hermeneutic circle approach.

The findings indicated that the participants experienced empathy within SMC and that the salience of those experiences appeared to be related to a number of factors, including respondents' degree of engagement and the *richness* of their multimedia conferencing experiences. A wide range of findings related to how participants experienced empathy was presented, representing a range of empathic experiences. The coding of emergent themes that led to the stimulation of participant's own models of empathy suggested a multifaceted relationship may exist between the participant, the physical environment, and the social environment, bound together through empathic interaction. Several implications were identified from the research and the results were discussed in light of previous research. Future research directions were also discussed along with the contributions to knowledge the research has made.

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