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SPEAKERS

Heather Woods, Michelle T



Heather Woods 00:08

Hello, you're listening to the SEL in Action podcast, the podcast where we explore what social and emotional learning looks like in educational and professional settings. I'm your host Heather Woods. And today on episode one, we'll be talking about what social and emotional competencies are needed in a K to 12 Online Learning context, we'll be speaking with Michelle Thomason, an educator from the UK. This episode is part of the social and emotional competencies and distance leadership series. Michelle is a English media teacher and curriculum area leader in sixth form. So she is teaching 16 to 19 year olds, in the inner city and she kind of setting and she's been doing this for about 20 years, and she's now doing her doctorate in education. Whilst Continuing to teach part time and she's her research is exploring the recent UK curriculum reforms to a level Media Studies. So thank you so much, Michelle, for speaking to me, and you know, seen my post and



Michelle T 01:17

You're very welcome.



Heather Woods 01:20

Really appreciate it. Um, so we've been talking a little bit just by email and on social

media about kind of what is covered underneath these social emotional competencies. And so there's a ton of diverse skills kind of included in this self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship building and decision making. And so I wonder what skills you see as the most essential for yourself as an educator.

M

Michelle T 01:54

Yeah, I think it's it's important to have empathy for the students actually, particularly since moving Online, under the current circumstances is actually understanding that, you know, you no longer have that face to face opportunity to read them. You know, you can see often when they walk into class and what, what mood they're in and you know that that kind of sort of emotional intelligence has been stripped away, and they're behind the screen now. And I think finding methods of communication that makes it safe for them to say, how they're feeling and how they're trying to learn or not, you know, and when making it a safe space for them to say, I'm not doing this very well or I can't, you know, I'm not finding it easy. You know, and I think that, to me, has been kind of like the major factor in those students who have engaged those who have been really kind of consistent in the development online, you know, that there have been number of students who have kind of almost replicated their competencies from the classroom, online and in some ways actually enhanced them, because you can see that, you know, when, when going online, it's it's stripped bare quite a lot of the skills that students have. Because, you know, you don't have the veneer of all the different, you know, noise, the noise of the, the general kind of day, you know, they're, they're sort of going about their business in college and face to face, but then actually, when all of that is taken away, what you're left with is the actual kind of raw skills that they have, and how they actually learn. And that's been really interesting, quite, quite depressing for some students to see that actually, you know, some of the ones that struggled in class anyway, with with self management and, you know, sort of that self efficacy of keeping to deadlines and structuring their time and things like that, that's just been exacerbated and magnified 100 times over since moving online because they, they, they didn't have those skills kind of embedded properly beforehand. And it's just with with, with that contact being taken away from their teachers, you know that they don't have that structure and support. They're, you know, they're not being dragged along constantly to do that. And I think, you know, that that's something that it's been a real downside of this. But then on the upside, you know, the students are talking about just before, they sort of developed really well. And in one incident incident, I've got one student who, incredibly shy student, always been hard working, always been kind of, you know, just just keeping under the radar and doing all the work and everything and, you know, and she has just absolutely blossomed. It's been a joy to see and she's, her commuication, She, she much prefers to talk by email or we have this discussion forums online as well and, and do it privately. And so, you know, the

questions she's been asking, she would never have the confidence to ask in class. And so this kind of asynchronous way of working, but also you can kind of have it a bit live as well. So we've had live discussion forums, which she's not as keen on, but she likes to reflect on things. So I think, you know, to answer your question, I think, I think, you know, it's understanding the students strengths and how they feel about themselves as well and their competences in the process.



Heather Woods 05:38

And so, you kind of mentioned earlier at the start is creating that safe space for them to engage but also, you know, be able to come to you if they're struggling with the situation and I mean, there's, you know, it's not just learning that they're struggling with at the moment. So how do you go about creating that like engaging empathy and creating that space for them to kind of feel safe to be able to discuss things online with you?

M

Michelle T 06:10

Well, I think, you know, it's important that the relationships we built beforehand, are replicated online as well. And I think, you know, if I hadn't if these students would need to me, it would be really hard, it would be an uphill battle, because, you know, you can't forge a personal relationship, or professional relationship with students, if you don't already have that in real life. And so I guess, you know, what, you know, these students I've taught for at least most of the year, and some students two years, and so there's already a foundation there. And so we already have a kind of shared way of working, they understand how I deal with things, you know, and so, I would try and be consistent or have been consistent in terms of I email them on a Monday morning as a kind of general How are you? How's things going? Check in In that kind of thing, and then on the Tuesday, which was when we'd normally have a lesson, it was the work. And on the Monday, I'd warn them, that's what was happening. And it would be consistent every week. So they would always expect to have that. And then it would always be like a kind of a warm, you know, look, if you're struggling, just email me, you know, it's fine. We can just work through it. And we can organize, you know, zoom meetings. And so we didn't in the early days, actually, we didn't really have many live video calls. Partially because I think it's partly down to the leadership where I work that they assume that that lockdown was going to last, say three weeks or something, I don't know. And it was all a little bit. We tend to be quite optimistic about things unfortunately. Which is quite strange being British because we're not usually that optimistic about many things, but, um, but we certainly didn't think or hope that it was going to last as long Is it actually has done and we weren't prepared, I don't think really as a kind of institution to deal with the situations that that has arisen. Now, as a media teacher, I feel like our department was a lot better prepared. Because we

do an awful lot of teaching and resources online, we use an online platform, and then the students have got more media literate kind of skills anyway, so I think, to some of the methods that we've taught, so I kind of think that when when I was immediately contacted them in those first few weeks, it was just actually letting them also know that we were just finding a way through this and keeping up to date them up to date with that we don't know all the answers. And they can see that, you know, it's not a them and us situation. It is a shared experience, and that we're going to try and support as much as possible. And, you know, I think You know, there's a there's always going to be those students who haven't engaged and whatever strategies we chose, we're not going to really be that effective. So the pastoral side of things, and I know, we spent a lot of time ringing students individually, they weren't engaging, but they weren't picking up phones either. You know, so it was really difficult and, you know, you can't go and doorstep them. So you know, it's I think we think we've managed to get through to about 90% of students now and about about 40% have engaged either very consistently, or mostly. Yeah, yeah, there's the safe space I think is is just about, you know, just trying to move that that personal relationship online and keeping that going in just not not telling them things but just supporting them and asking questions, and giving them an opportunity to respond.



Heather Woods 10:04

Mm hmm, Yeah. And then, you mentioned earlier as well, kind of the like self management and like time management stuff on behalf of your students. Are there any strategies that you're engaging with to kind of help foster these social emotional skills within your students? through your online interactions?

M

Michelle T 10:26

Yeah, I mean, we were very transparent as to how we're doing this. And we're saying that these are the methods that we're using. Please talk to us if it's not working for you, and we try and make it bite size. So I think initially, a lot of teachers were sending out work on a Monday for the whole week. And what students would have in their online platform inbox would be you know, it say these students are doing say, three A Levels And they would have six basically that six teachers sending them work on a Monday morning, which would be probably over ambitious anyway, of teachers who you know, might be, and, and they were feeling really overwhelmed. So, like we made sure in our department that we will kind of like stripping it back. So they would be sort of fed, bite sized chunks of learning and that the expectations were that they could do things over a period of time and that we would check in with them as to their progress, not

necessarily the finished product. That so and so in terms of time management, that's how we kind of approached it. And we gave them the opportunity to do kind of like the live so we never actually did live online teaching as such not like you know you would do in a classroom.



Heather Woods 11:51

Mm hmm.

M

Michelle T 11:52

What we did was we would set them to work they would go off and do it. And then the next week we would have like a question answer seminar style session. So they would come with things. And we would ask them questions. And some of them would be able to answer them, some of them wouldn't. And, you know, we could have a discussion and dialogue. So I suppose it's kind of like what you would have in a classroom where you would get them to go off and do a task and activity, and then you would come back as a class and discuss it. And so that worked much better. And it was an easier space, I think, to do that in. And a lot of students don't like appearing on camera. So, you know, we gave them the option to not have the camera on and just to see us instead. And I think that that kind of work, too. So time management really was kind of just a variety of strategies, really. Just to make sure that they were on board with that and ask asking them, you know, is this working for you?



Heather Woods 12:47

Mm hmm.

M

Michelle T 12:48

And if it's not, why,



Heather Woods 12:50

yeah. Yeah. and engage in a little bit of self reflection and then yeah, exactly, to guide them. So what would you say like Would you say that time management is kind of the most pressing kind of social emotional skill? Or is there a different one for your students to kind of help you that you can kind of help them kind of build through this online learning situation? What do you think? Yeah,

M

Michelle T 13:18

I think it varies. I think it varies, I think for some students is about confidence, actually, it's when I say confidence, what I mean is I'm not as necessarily people, but the set up at home, to confidently work on their own and to know that they're doing the right things, and to be able to contact and communicate and to, you know, if they're struggling to email because, you know, I still haven't been able to get through to some students who, you know, you email an email and they don't you don't get response back. And then others you get lots of emails and they're happy to in they're very mature in the way that they talk to you. So I think Confidence. But also, you know, most students have very different backgrounds, you know, working backgrounds in terms of environment. And, you know, some of them are sharing laptops with siblings, you know, parents are key workers out, you know, and they're looking after their siblings and, or they don't have consistent Wi Fi or they're trying to tap on their phones, and it's just not working. And so I think confidence in that respect is that you have confidence in your environment confidence in that you can actually get on and do the work. But that and the confidence to tell somebody else like me, that have those don't have an ideal kind of background to your working environment to be able to do that. And so I think that for some, for some students, you know, that's, that's the major issue and that's we have to work around. But yeah, I think time management for all of them to some degree, despite the fact they've had nothing to do three months other than schoolwork, and, you know, it's, it's, it's kinda Yeah, I think giving them strategies. And I think there does need to be some kind of online literacy online learning literacy. After this, I think I think this is really important that just because we make we make the wrong assumptions, often, in general, that young people because they're on the phones all the time that they actually understand how to use technology, effectively, and they don't, you know, I don't like the term digital natives because that assumes that everybody who is, you know, digitally native, it knows how to do it to the best of their ability and of course, we know that's not right, you know, all the Yeah, the issues with social media and, you know, actually what you what you've got is probably a whole load of teenagers sitting at home on their phones constantly scrolling through tik tok or, or YouTube and not actually really fully critiquing what they're seeing and, and it's, it's a black hole of time for a lot of them and I don't have anything against any of those social media platforms, I mean, I teach about them but I think what I do have is that it tends to be detrimental to them and their mental health if they're just sitting there not being productive. And you know, they enter that kind of scroll hole and they can't get out of it and then it's, it's addictive as well and their brains kind of get set into this mode of not being able to manage their time and and actually, you know, doing doing their schoolwork isn't as exciting and potentially these little hits of what they were seeing online so I think the media literacy angle, which obviously is my background,

anyway, it's really important I think online literacies for learning really needs to take a front seat when we go back to whatever normal is going to look like and so yeah, and time management is part of that, but how do you manage your time online, you know that that is the norm And how do you balance it with not being online? You know, because it's it, there's this sort of obsession with, you know, zoom and teams and you know, everything and everyone this, you know, you've got this brand new tech, well, seemingly brand new technology that everyone is now using really seamlessly. But it doesn't necessarily, once that kind of novelty wears off, what we left with, hey, you know, where's the pedagogical value in all of these things?



Heather Woods 17:25

Yeah. Yeah, it was really interesting. Actually. Yesterday, I sent a check in video to my own students. So graduate students, and they were talking about on their discussion boards, we're talking about coping right now. With teaching and leading at a distance, and we're talking about mindfulness and that sort of thing. And one of the students actually brought up and so I brought it up in my check in to them was, you know, these students that or individuals that were born, you know, in the 90s, and they've grown up with this technology, mindfulness is very hard to do, because they don't know how to disengage from the technology, right, like, you and I, like we didn't have all of this technology when we were growing up, right. So it was very, very different. And but, you know, I think it's important to acknowledge also that even though we didn't have that necessarily growing up, you know, we're inundated with the teams and zoom and all this stuff right now. And particularly, you and I, so I also studied digital literacies. Um, so very Media Studies. So, yeah, like, we're interested in this stuff, and we're looking at it and, you know, it's, it's not, it's definitely playing into, I mean, all my productivity stuff relies on technology.



Michelle T 19:00

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, nothing.



Heather Woods 19:04

Yeah, so my planner has moved to pen and paper. And my, my husband actually the other day mentioned, like, why don't you just do this in Google Calendar? And I was like, yeah, it takes me away from the computer and I can just sit there and like, thoughtfully think about my week.

 M

Michelle T 19:21

Exactly. And I think it engages different parts of the brain in different ways. Because it's like, you know, if you try reading on a screen, it's very different to reading an actual physical book and processes that kind of synapses is that kind of, you know, keep keep sparking a very different, you know, in those different situations. And I think, you know, for students to constantly be at the, almost like the beck and call of technology because they they're so used to having it at their fingertips and reliant on it as well. And, you know, obviously, there's huge benefits to that and for them to be digitally literate in those ways, but it's, it's this way Immediate world that we live in that just, we just heard that, you know, another thing pings on his notifications. Your your immediate reaction isn't it is particularly for a student if you're in a bit of a conversation and then you press the notification or the or the text message or the WhatsApp message and your attention is constantly diverted, and I think, eventually the, the kind of the brains are going to be programmed to not be able to concentrate in those kind of intensive periods where you need to just focus on things. And so that that's quite, that's quite challenging. I think when you're typically when you're teaching and I know, I know, in the class, even in the classroom, you know, students have got one on their phones.



Heather Woods 20:47

Oh, yeah.

M

Michelle T 20:49

And it lights in that, you know, they're not allowed to use it, but they that lights up in their faces, you know, and then if they're online, you don't have that that kind of eyes on you. To, to guard against that. So they're going to be yeah diverted all the time. And so even students who are good at time management, they're still going to have those pressures and the extra kind of, you know, noise in their heads that are going to kind of make make it difficult for them to do that.



Heather Woods 21:21

So I think this might be a very big question. Do you have ideas or a way that you can structure or strategies that you can include while your online teaching to kind of help foster like disengagement and maybe self reflection on their time management strategy, or that sort of thing?

M

Michelle T 21:51

Yeah, it is. I don't think I've come up with a failsafe strategy yet and I'm not sure when that will that What happened I think will be I could retire when, when that does happen. But again, just I think going back to that, that thing sort of said at the beginning is communication and trying to foster not seeing themselves as individuals but part of the group but a dynamic that actually they share. So you know, that the discussion forums that we've operated have been really good and, and I've tried to kind of reply to one student but then bouncing it to another student in the group and saying, you know, you've been doing this work, how do you feel about what X has said and trying to kind of keep a conversation and dialogue going, because that's the sort of the type of communications you have online and very different to face to face, you know, that even you know, we're talking on a one to one now, but reliant on that kind of, you know, the yellow box switching, and knowing when to turn take and actually you can read people a lot better in a room and then you can on a screen and You know, your your natural ways of communicating perhaps change a little bit? You know, I probably talk I probably talk too much anyway. And then you know, is it but it's it's hard to it's much harder to read and for students to get that new form of communication and modes modes of communication is going to be a skill for the future actually, as well, you know that this is, in some ways whilst we've been forced to do all of this very quickly and probably, you know, slightly clunkily it has actually catapulted us all into a new way of working and students will, will have this as their normal in their employment for the future. And so, in some ways those have engaged with it now and understand how it kind of intersects with face to face learning and the home environment. I think this is important as well that this blending we talk about blended learning but I also think that Know, the blending of the professional in the personal or the, you know, your school life and your home life, and suddenly were these two things were pretty separate. You're suddenly having to kind of deal with everything in one space. And that's been an interesting concept. So, so yeah, I think the strategies, just always go back to communication and dialogue, and just a variety and, you know, things that are going to get students to do independent learning, to talk to each other, to want to, you know, improve on what they you know, they get a feedback, obviously, as well from, you know, their assignments that they put online. And, you know, again, that creates a dialogue. I think, actually, my feedback to them has been 100% better than it would be normally because I've had more slightly more time because we've much focused on it much more focused on the individuals but you could actually have a dialogue on online on the on the platform learning platform, we use handwriting marks on an essay, I'm actually writing in a box, which they then can respond to so immediately doing these kind of direct reflection tasks. And yeah, they've got they've got that as a kind of an option really. And so that gives them confidence. And it gives them more awareness of how they're actually doing. And you can actually see physically, they've got all their work in one place. And so they can actually see their progress.



Heather Woods 25:36

Mm hmm. Yeah, I mean, that it touches on so many pieces of social emotional competencies, right, like, you're fostering perspective taking and social awareness and reflection and you know, fostering their self efficacy and confidence and, and being able to do this on their own. Yeah, I Our learning platform at the university doesn't allow for a lot of like back and forth feedback.

M

Michelle T 26:06

Right Okay,



Heather Woods 26:07

so like, I create a Google Doc for all my students. And then so we can have that dialogue going back and forth. Yeah, if they so wish they don't have to. But they're always getting feedback, formative feedback from me in that space. Um, which, yeah, I think is critical for, you know, building their confidence and building their, you know, ability to or comfort in, you know, maybe thinking outside the box a little bit because ya know, that they can kind of bounce those ideas with me.

M

Michelle T 26:45

Exactly. And I guess, you know, goes back to that idea about safe space, they can they can take risks. You know, I have students who completely got something entirely wrong and completely misunderstood what I was asking him to do, and we were able to have that conversation in a private space away from any other eyes in the classroom. And I was able to tackle those misconceptions. And then she came back and actually, she might have felt really embarrassed and, you know, ashamed that she'd got something so badly wrong. But actually, we did it in a very easy kind of supportive way. And she came back with a brilliant piece of work from that. And I guess there are kind of elements of being online away from people. You can hide if you want to, in some respects, and do your thinking and private and that kind of works. And typically, that student I was saying before, she's really blossomed. I mean, she's, you know, his outstanding work she's produced and she's clearly just gone away and thought about things. You know, she's had the time and it got to the point where I was talking to my teaching partner. We were saying, God, if we she's probably better off just staying online for the rest of the year because I think actually being in the classroom with us, it's counterproductive to you know, we were like a little bit kind of, you know, so there are people like That who really, really understand and love that, you know, and I suppose it depends on your personality type, so

kind of introverted people, you know, flourish often in these environments. Whereas extroverts, you know, are kind of, you don't want to see it as a binary of introversion extroversion. So, no, there's obviously massive spectrums of that, but I think generalizing, you know, people who, who need who feed off communication and people and contact that I think those those are the people who've really suffered actually, and then learning learning is is directly predicated on that, that kind of nourishment of human contact. And whereas others, they they flourish because they really don't have to, you know, speak to anybody and be with anybody. So it's, it's almost like recharging the batteries in different ways, you know?



Heather Woods 28:55

Mh hmm.

M

Michelle T 28:56

So that's kind of interesting to see. But I do I do think that there needs to be when we go back a course almost or a programme of like, we don't want to use this phrase in the way that it sounds but reinstitutionalizing students and that's a horrible phrase to use. But you know what I mean? Like re re interfacing them back into kind of learning mode and understanding how to use online understanding how to effectively manage their time. And then what happens if they don't feel confident? What happens if they are not working to the best of their ability? Who do they go to what support networks they have? And that sort of communication as well on? It's a maturity thing as well. This idea of like, students being able to say to their teachers, hi, how are you? Oh, yeah, that's the other thing as well thinking about it. The students who've done the best, Who have engaged consistently are the ones who do email and go actually, that these are the emails that you see. Hi, Michelle, we call each other we call it by first name. So it's Hi, Michelle, you know, hope you're well. How are you? Question mark, you know, I'm just wondering if you could help me with x, y and Zed? Or does this have to be in by such and such date? You know, and it's, it's a, it's a light touch, kind of quite mature style of communication from a 16 year old who, you know, for the person that sit next normally in the class con, you know, really engage like that. You often get emails from them that don't start with a greeting. I'm not you know, I'm not I'm not necessarily that bothered about you know, all the niceties. But if you can kind of see how their their communications are developing as a result. They can understand it to communicate with other people. So, yeah,



Heather Woods 30:50

know that it's, I think, moving into this like pandemic and emergency online teaching, it's really highlighted all these other skills. That maybe we didn't focus on it so much in the class. But yeah, like you said it, we now need to, when we bring them back kind of reintegrate and rethink about how we structure this, you know, not only for if this happens again, but planning for the future and knowing that, you know, we're likely going to keep a lot of things online. Yeah, and professional lives, right. So



Michelle T 31:27

Well, I mean, there's there's one one big College in London that my friend is at, she teaches there, and they're not going back until January, that ain't blended well. So all online learning until January, because it's it's in central London, and students don't want they don't want the students to be getting on public transport. Yeah. You know, and so that's really interesting. And then I know we had a meeting earlier on this week from my place and we were having two timetables, the option to time tables next year. So we've got a you mentioned sort of three ones in, for your place. Yeh.



Heather Woods 32:00

Yeah, University. Yeah, sorry, go ahead.



Michelle T 32:04

I know what that one is, you know, the option of being face to face full time. And the other one is a blended learning where students will come in for blocks of time during the week, and then they'll go home. And then some of the learning will be online in the afternoon. And we've also made a decision to move away from the learning platform that we've been using as well, because that's, that's not conducive. So it's interesting, this kind of technological determinism aspect of how students learn, and actually the platform we have been using, which is a pretty common one. But it just hasn't worked. It's too clunky. It's too It's, it's not. It's a bit counterintuitive when you're using it and if we find that difficult as staff and students will find it quite difficult to and so when we are using google classroom and hopefully, I mean, I'm sure there'll be issues with that. as well, but I think, you know, I've used it with my kids for their school, and it seems a lot more seamless than. So it's interesting how that but the technology also will, will change the way students feel about themselves and their confidence. I mean, I, I'm fully expecting them to be quite anxious and under confident about using new technology, particularly with a few months trying to battle with everything else. So that's going to be a challenge as well, getting them to feel like confident, again, to be able to use the technology, but again, we'll be

using for the first time to So I think, you know, learning with the students is that it is important in them to understand that it's all kind of like a going along with the flow together.



Heather Woods 33:47

Yeah. Excellent. Well, I'm conscious of your time. I know you're on a tight schedule. So I do really appreciate that. But I think you really highlighted some strategies and competencies and skills that are really, really important to the shift to online, you know, with empathy and consistency in your communication and expectations. We talked about, you know, building students confidence through feedback and, you know, a lot of it comes down to communication strategies, which I mean, I've talked about quite a bit in my course and just the consistency, the tone that you're using, you know, and providing creating that social climate where students are feeling safe and engaged and aware that they're not alone, you know, that they have there are other students that are going through this, they're that you're there with them in it and, you know, demonstrating your own vulnerability in the sense that you know, you're figuring this out to the sea and absolutely are. Um, so yeah, I think it's, it's really highlighted, you know, a lot of these key skills that not only ourselves as educators need to implement, and think about but also how we can foster that with our students. So I really, really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today. You're very welcome. Thanks for listening to the SEL in Action podcast with Heather Woods. If you like the show and want to know more, check out SEL-in-Action.com or leave us a review on iTunes. Be sure to follow SEL in Action on Facebook and Twitter for updates on our podcast. I'll talk to you soon.